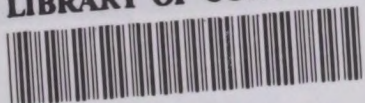


A
Modern Knight

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



00019248434



Class P23

Book H685 M

Copyright N^o _____

COPYRIGHT DEPOSIT.

A Modern Knight

(A Trans-Atlantic Trifle)

DAISY G. S. HOLBROOK



HARTFORD, CONN.
THE CASE, LOCKWOOD & BRAINARD CO.

1911

PZ3
H685
M

Copyright 1911

By DAISY G. S. HOLBROOK.



©CL.A305254

NO. 1

TO G. M. H.

TO MY HUSBAND, WHO SUPPLIED THE TWO THINGS MOST NECESSARY FOR THE COMPLETION OF ANY LITERARY EFFORT,—INSPIRATION AND ENCOURAGEMENT,—I DEDICATE THIS STORY, SINCERELY HOPING THAT, ALTHOUGH IT MUST BE CLASSED WITH “TRIFLES LIGHT AS AIR,” IT MAY STILL JUSTIFY ITS EXISTENCE BY ITS ABILITY TO WHILE AWAY AN IDLE AFTERNOON.

D. G. S. H.

Springfield, Massachusetts.

CHAPTER ONE.



ALTON really noticed her for the first time as she came into the Pullman at the Terminal Station, trailing along despondently in the wake of a stout, middle-aged woman and a most attenuated specimen of humanity of the masculine gender. It was merely a cursory glance, caught as the party passed his section, en route for their own next beyond, and the only thing about the girl which at all impressed him was a pair of dark, frightened-looking eyes which stole a tiny peep in his direction as their owner drifted by. Then he proceeded to settle himself in his own seat, arranged a goodly number of papers and periodicals within comfortable reaching distance, and before the train had fairly pulled out of the station he was many miles removed from such trivial matters as girls with appealing brown eyes and grotesquely matched escorts.

While his person was being whirled away upon the first stage of his journey across a con-

A MODERN KNIGHT

continent which, to him, should have possessed all the charms of the unknown, his unruly mind persisted in dwelling upon the people and things that he had left behind him in a peaceful English town, only ten days or so before. His life, as he looked back upon it now, seemed to have been a particularly uneventful one. All through his much-repressed childhood he appeared to have done the usual things,—things which were expected of the elder son of an old and fiercely aristocratic family. His little school-fellows had one and all deferred to him a trifle more than to his younger half-brother,—everyone had seemed to expect a greater degree of excellence in conduct and proficiency in study,—a finer show of prowess upon the athletic-field, and a few extra honors upon his graduation,—just because he happened to be Fordyce, MAJOR! He wondered, idly, as he had often and often done before, why, when this general excellence was always so plainly demanded and expected of the elder sons of his race, Nature so often endowed the younger brothers with a little the most brains, perseverance, and industry, thus rendering it so difficult for the elder ones to maintain their supremacy. It certainly did not seem fair, and he lazily pondered the matter as he watched

A MODERN KNIGHT

the long lines of telegraph-poles reel drunkenly past the grimy windows of the train.

Alton Fordyce was six years the senior of his half-brother, Harry, and, as eldest son, direct heir to the title of Baronet and to the estate of Fairmead Park, now occupied by his father, James Fordyce, an elderly and feeble man, with only a short vista of years ahead of him. But with his seniority, and his consequent claim to the title, his superiority over his brother ceased,—at least in Alton's opinion. Harry was so handsome, so bright, so altogether charming in mind, manners and person, that it was little wonder that people should like him the better of the two,—(so ran Alton's thoughts,) and it certainly was not at all remarkable that, deep down in her heart, a girl of twenty should prefer the fascinating, debonair Harry, only four years her senior, to his graver brother of thirty!

It had been an unmistakable shock to him when he had come face to face with that preference, crudely expressed, but in reviewing the matter, it had all seemed perfectly reasonable and natural. All his life he remembered being impressed with the idea that one of the many things he was "expected to do" was to some

A MODERN KNIGHT

day marry Miss Frances Stanhope, only child of his father's dearest friend, whose lands adjoined Fairmead on the eastern side. Just how he had received that impression he could not have told, but it had been definitely embodied in the atmosphere which had surrounded him, for as far back as he was able to remember. As children, the two brothers had often quarreled over which should do this or that small service for Fanny, and whenever the older lad had been chosen by the girl for any of her small expeditions and plans, it had never even occurred to Alton that Harry's fits of sulks could have been occasioned by anything more serious than childish temper. How blind he had been, he thought, as he went mercilessly on with his mental arraignment of himself! As the young people grew older, Frances and Alton were naturally thrown more and more into the society of each other until, when she was approaching the age of twenty, he had begun to urge their marriage, as an event long looked forward to and anticipated by both their families. He was forced to acknowledge, in looking back over the affair, that, obviously, he could never have really loved the girl,—at least not as she deserved and had the right to be loved,—he had always

A MODERN KNIGHT

taken everything concerning their ultimate union too much for granted for that! He remembered that he had always been a little shy where women were concerned, and very probably this had prevented his knowing just how to make himself sufficiently indispensable to this particular member of the sex, for it certainly seemed that he had failed in this one of the "expected things," even as in some of the others.

He did not feel quite so bitterly about it as he had at first, although he knew that the girl's white face among the tall roses in the dear old garden at home would live in his memory for many a long day. They had been chatting together at dusk, and as they carelessly rested their elbows upon the mossy old sun-dial, he had remarked, tentatively, "Well, Fan, what do you say to our being married in the Autumn?" and he felt that he would never be able to banish from his remembrance her startled look and pleading eyes as she had visibly withdrawn from his proffered caress, and buried her face in her hands, in a paroxysm of weeping. It had taken some very clever strategy on his part to gain her confidence, but at last he heard the whole, short and pitiful as it was,—how she cared for Harry and Harry loved her;

A MODERN KNIGHT

how she had vainly endeavored to make herself care for Alton in that way, and, being thoroughly aware of the attitude of both families upon the subject, how very unhappy both she and Harry were over the whole affair.

To Alton's unselfish nature it had seemed quite in the natural course of events that pretty Frances should prefer his brother, and after spending a full half hour in administering comfort to her, he had left her divided between smiles and tears, with a most brotherly salutation, and the assurance that she should never be forced into a marriage with himself against her will, and that he would explain matters to his father for her.

He was fanatically devoted to his attractive half-brother and consequently was eager and willing to do anything within his power to promote his happiness. Therefore he had gone to his parent with a plain statement of the facts,—braved his anger at this declination upon the part of his son to fulfill the share of the long-cherished plan which devolved upon him,—and heard with a stony calm, but an uplifted soul, the irate gentleman's forcibly expressed wish "never to set eyes upon him again until he came to his senses!"

A MODERN KNIGHT

Then he had penned a note to Harry,— a note brimming with affectionate good wishes and explanations,— said a fond adieu to the step-mother who had cared for him so lovingly since his boyhood, and of whom he was very fond,— collected his traveling necessities, the revolver which was his especial pet,— the little pearl-encircled miniature of the young mother whom he did not even remember,— and hurried to take his passage upon the first American-bound liner, heading for California,— perhaps Alaska,— then — he had not really decided where.

CHAPTER TWO.

“UST call fo' dinner!”

The cry, in the broad, melodious drawl of the colored race, rang through the car, whirling Alton Fordyce back with a jerk over three thousand miles of ocean to his immediate surroundings. He began to realize that he was the possessor of an “aching void” in the vicinity of his belt-line, so he leisurely followed the white-clothed negro back through several swaying Pullmans to the diner. It was very comfortably filled by the time he arrived upon the scene, and he stood for some time waiting for the presiding genius of the miniature hotel to find him a place.

“If you'll wait, sir, I can give you a seat facing forward, in a few moments,” remarked that functionary, politely. Somehow, Alton Fordyce was a man to whom those of an inferior station usually deemed it advisable to be more or less deferential.

A MODERN KNIGHT

"Never mind," answered Fordyce cheerfully, "I'd just as soon ride backward."

"All right, sir,—this way, sir!" and before he knew it he was being installed at the table already occupied by the three people whom he had remarked upon their entrance into the train. He became distinctly curious about them when he began to appreciate what a peculiarly assorted group they were.

The man was very tall, extremely homely, and thin almost to the point of emaciation. His chin was clean-shaven, leaving a heavy, drooping moustache and small side-whiskers of a very indeterminate shade of brown,—his eyes were small and grey with a look of craftiness about them,—his nose was hooked,—and he was topped off by a heavy shock of hair of the same color (or lack of definite color!) as his whiskers. He had a somewhat furtive manner of glancing about him which contrasted oddly with a rather cruel mouth and a very determined chin, and in spite of himself Fordyce was interested in the combination.

The elder woman looked to be at least ten years her husband's junior, and notwithstanding her avoirdupois, one would be at once aware that she was, of necessity, the least effective of

A MODERN KNIGHT

the two. She had thin, mouse-colored hair, drawn tightly back from her temples and twisted into a hard little knot on top of her head. Her face was round and plump, with a receding chin and a narrow and flattened forehead, and when she opened her eyes to their fullest extent they had the opaque appearance of china-blue marbles. Judging from the glances which she cast at her husband when he spoke, it was easy to see that she was completely under his domination.

The third member of the party was clearly not yet out of that enchanting period, extending approximately from fifteen to eighteen, when a girl has ceased to be a child, but has not yet arrived at the real estate of womanhood; the period when, being familiar only with her own shadowy world, peopled with her dream-ideals, she eagerly welcomes each new type which the great Juggler, Chance, places before her as one more specimen to be studied and added to her ever growing store of impressions. She was of medium height, slender and graceful, with the unstudied charm of a child, and Fordyce noted that except for a touch of white at throat and wrists she was attired with extreme simplicity in the deepest black, which

A MODERN KNIGHT

served to accentuate the fragility of her appearance. Her light brown hair fell in wavy profusion about a broad low forehead and was massed in a loose knot at the back of her head, where it was held in place by two large-headed pins, the whole seeming almost too heavy for the slender neck and delicate, oval countenance.

Alton was struck by her strong resemblance to a pretty child whom he had known at home, but he soon saw that where there should have been bright, laughing eyes and a merry, childish mouth to complete the illusion, yet neither one was there before him. In some indefinable way she impressed him as discouraged and sad, and he furtively studied her, behind the screen of his menu-card, mentally coming to the decision that she must have been going through some heavy sorrow or trouble. Her dreamy, brown eyes seemed to have tears lurking not far back of their velvety depths, and there was a pathetic droop to the lovely mouth which comported ill with the firm compression of the red lips and the upward tilt of the small, round chin.

"Decidedly, an interesting specimen!" mused Fordyce, over his dinner, as he noted the defiant uplifting of her shapely head, when-

A MODERN KNIGHT

ever the masculine member of the party addressed a remark to her, and the look of utter disgust and loathing with which she favored his unconscious head. She possessed an odd little trick of lifting her hand to push some straying tendrils of hair back from her face, which, somehow, was very familiar to the man sitting opposite her, and he racked his brain to remember where he had ever seen it before. Suddenly there leaped into the forefront of his memory, a picture,—a green waste of tumbling waters, as far as the eye could reach,—a leaden sky, as a background,—and a slim, childish figure wrapped in some sort of a long, dark cloak, leaning against the rail of a huge, transatlantic liner, gazing with wide eyes over the great expanse of ocean,—entirely alone and utterly lonely,—and now and then putting up a slender hand to push back the hair from her face, as the blustering wind made havoc of what it could reach, under her turned-down, felt hat. He had thought the little figure *was* that of a child as he had passed and re-passed it each evening in his own restless pacing of the deck,—but it must have been this girl! As he arrived at this conclusion he unconsciously raised his eyes, in order to verify his surmise, and met the gaze

A MODERN KNIGHT

of the brown ones opposite, turned full upon him. For a moment he could think of nothing so much as the expression in the eyes of a doe (once wounded by his hand),—an expression which had haunted him and prevented his ever hunting again. In the short space in which their glances crossed he read fear, dislike and a pitiful look of hopelessness which it hurt him to see,—then she lowered her eyes to her plate and did not meet his glance again during the meal.

The Englishman, having just been separated from all his personal Lares and Penates, was in a mental condition which readily permitted of his regarding this forlorn girl with more interest than, under other and happier circumstances, would have been possible to his reserved and self-contained nature. Himself a stranger in a strange land, he thought of this young girl as a kindred spirit in his lonely trip across an unfamiliar continent, for he was beginning to appreciate that, in all this world, there is no sense of loneliness which can compare, in its intensity, with the feeling of utter isolation which assails the traveler in any densely populated section of a foreign country. In the midst of the roar and bustle of the busy cos-

A MODERN KNIGHT

mopolitan life which surges around the wanderer, he realizes that not one single individual, out of all these thronging thousands, cares one particle what happens to himself, and this sensation of complete detachment was heavy upon the mind and heart of this son of Britain as he steadily and relentlessly added to the number of miles between himself and Fairmead.

.

Fordyce had lingered over his dinner and later, over a cigar, and when he finally returned to his own small domain, he found a commotion in the section next beyond his. The tall man was speaking angrily and gesticulating wildly,—his wife was huddled in a corner,—while both porter and conductor were endeavoring to pacify the enraged individual. Alton made out, from the scraps of the conversation which reached his ears, that through some error, the upper berth in their section had been sold to someone who was to board the train at its next stop, and then re-sold to the thin gentleman, and the conductor was vainly trying to straighten out the tangle by offering to exchange their section for one in another car. This would necessitate an early morning change, before that car should be

A MODERN KNIGHT

detached from the train, but it was the best they could do, the porter informed them.

Fordyce, noting their predicament, rose and addressing the elder woman, said, with a formal little bow,

"I beg your pardon, Madam, but if it would be any accommodation to either of you two ladies, the lower berth in my section is at your disposal. I usually spend the greater part of my sleeping-car nights either in reading or in the observation-car, so the upper will be entirely sufficient for my needs!"

The tall man wheeled sharply about, with a suspicious look in his eye.

"What's that? What's that?" he demanded, testily, casting uneasy glances from Alton to the two ladies, and back again.

"Beg pardon," answered Fordyce, calmly, "I said that if it would be any more convenient for your wife or — er — daughter, — the lower berth in section three is at their disposal."

"But Uncle, we can't possibly do that!" quickly protested the young girl who had been gazing straight in front of her with a singularly detached air. It was the first time Alton had heard her voice, which was low and clear, seeming an integral part of its possessor. "We

A MODERN KNIGHT

ought not to inconvenience a stranger in this way! We don't mind an early —— ”

“ Be quiet, Barbara! ” sternly interrupted her uncle. “ Of course we will accept this gentleman's kind offer,— and I will occupy that berth myself, leaving you and your aunt the original one. Don't attempt to dissuade me! ” (as the girl seemed about to speak) “ My mind is made up,— it never changes! Come, it is high time you were in bed,— you know you are not at all strong, and you have had a very trying day.”

“ Insufferable cad! ” muttered Alton to himself, for he felt aggrieved to think of his comfortable lower berth, so calmly appropriated by the man to whom he had taken such an unaccountable dislike, when his sole desire had been to extricate the two ladies from what had appeared to be a rather unpleasant predicament.

The sections were speedily made up and Fordyce noted that some argument seemed to be in progress between the two elders of the party, who cast uneasy glances toward their young companion, while the girl sat with averted head and a mutinous-looking mouth, evidently awaiting the result of their colloquy. Finally the ladies retired to the dressing-room, and as

A MODERN KNIGHT

they departed he heard the girl fling back over her shoulder,—

“Very well, Uncle, it is your own fault if you drive me to desperate measures! This is the last time I shall warn you,— hereafter, I shall act without that formality, and the consequences, (whatever they are!) will be upon your head!”

.

Alton betook himself almost immediately to the observation car, where he indited a long letter to his half-brother, a note to Frances, and one to his solicitors at their London address,— then settled himself for a long and comfortable evening. As he touched a match to an old and much battered pipe the young man commenced a mental summary of the events of the day, as was his invariable habit, and soon he was so deep in the puzzle of the peculiar relations of his three fellow-passengers that he failed to hear the other occupant of the platform go into the car, and failed again, an hour later, to hear the cautious re-opening of the door or the subdued sound of someone taking a seat over by the opposite rail. Alton's chair was entirely in the dense shadow, and the newcomer, evidently believing herself alone, laid her head on her

A MODERN KNIGHT

folded arms upon the railing and gave way to a paroxysm of uncontrollable sobbing.

Fordyce was too much engrossed in his own thoughts to notice that his solitude had been invaded, until he was startled by the sound of a smothered sigh and a sob-caught breath.

“Great Scott!” thought the man, “how long has she been out here?”

He couldn’t leave now, without allowing her to think that he had been all this time aware of her presence, and perhaps, spying upon her! Who was she, anyway, and why on earth didn’t she go in and go to bed, as became a lady?

A sudden lurch of the train caused the bowed head to lift, and the watching man beheld, full in the clear moonlight, the face of the girl with whom his mind had been so busily engaged. For a moment he was startled,—what was she doing there at that time of night, and alone? Then her words to her Uncle recurred to him,—“Desperate measures,—last time I’ll warn you,—consequences on your own head!” What did it mean? Plainly the child was unhappy,—could it be that she was meditating anything rash,—such as making away with herself, for instance? She certainly looked a mere child to him, in her clinging, black train-negligée,

A MODERN KNIGHT

and he could not believe she *was* more than a child. While these thoughts had been racing through his head, the train dashed out upon a spidery bridge, spanning a swiftly running river, and the girl stepped quickly toward the rail while Fordyce made a rapid stride forward, to be ready in case of emergency.

The girl looked up, startled by the sudden apparition, and her hand flew to her heart while she swayed heavily against the rail, and gasped out,

"What do you — what are you doing here?"

"Exactly what I wished to ask you," returned Fordyce, quietly, placing a chair for her and forcing her gently back into it, while his hand remained, for a moment, reassuringly upon her shoulder.

There was a long period of silence. Alton was never a very talkative man, and the girl seemed to be trying to make up her mind to speak.

"I'm not merely curious," volunteered Alton, at length, "please don't think that! And please don't feel obliged to tell me anything you would rather not,— but perhaps I might be able to help you in some way, you know!"

A MODERN KNIGHT

"I don't believe you could, though I'm very grateful for the thought," replied the girl, in a queer, level little voice. "I fear I am beyond outside help, now."

Her tone was so absolutely lifeless and she looked so forlorn and altogether pathetic that Alton felt a strange lump rise in his throat at the hopelessness of her. He wondered what her trouble could be, and how she happened to be out there at midnight, alone? Visions of kidnappers and child-stealers flashed through his brain, but in the same instant he decided against them. She was far too self-possessed for that, and besides, she had owned to kinship with both her fellow-travelers,—that he had heard with his own ears! He debated within himself whether or not he ought to insist upon some sort of an explanation,—and deep down in his inner consciousness he realized that he felt, in some indefinable way, strangely drawn toward this slip of a maiden, with the sad eyes and the air of having passed through stormy waters.

He waited quietly, still standing guard over the rail, his tall, massive form looming up huge and black against the silvery landscape, outside, while his calm gaze surveyed the flying panorama, and the silence seemed to invite his companion to relieve her mind of its burden.

CHAPTER THREE.

“URELY you were not thinking of ——” he gave a shuddering glance at the rail as he spoke and her eyes followed his.

“Oh, no,” she answered, simply, “I’m not brave enough for that!”

A great wave of pity swept over Alton Fordyce. He leaned down from his station near the rail and placed one large, protective hand over the two clasped listlessly in her lap. “You poor child,—poor, troubled little girl,” he said gently: “Wouldn’t it do you good to tell what’s bothering you?”

She smiled wanly up at him but made no effort to withdraw her hands from his clasp for several moments.

“I’m so ashamed to look you in the face after what happened about the berth,” she said at last, with a ghost of a smile, “I just couldn’t sleep!”

A MODERN KNIGHT

"For worry about that?" he asked, following her lead. It was borne in upon his masculine intellect that she *was* a child in her mental processes, and that unless she was permitted to take her own time and way in the telling there would never be anything told, at all.

"Partly that," she answered, musingly. "And Uncle never even thanked you as he should have done."

"That was entirely unnecessary! I saw that it helped you ladies out of a beastly hole, and was jolly glad to do it,—so don't let that worry you one bit, please!"

The girl gave him a grateful look, and after an interval of silence, exclaimed,

"Oh! When I think of everything, I wish I had the courage to ——" a quick glance at the rail completed the sentence as clearly as words could have done.

"Child! child!" expostulated Alton, "you don't know what you are saying! The greatest coward on this earth is the person who takes his or her own life, don't you realize that? It requires bravery to *live* and to force a recognition from that fickle goddess, Fate!" Then as if he wished to divert her mind and turn her thoughts into other channels, he finished, whim-

A MODERN KNIGHT

sically: "I think women are really much braver than men, don't you?"

"I'm not a child," she returned, "truly I'm not, and you've called me that several times. And why do you consider women the braver?"

"Well, since you object to being called a child, don't you think that, as a woman, you are showing bravery in defying Mrs. Grundy, and talking to a strange man in the wee small hours of the night, on the observation platform of a train, with only the moon for a chaperone?"

"You're not a strange man," returned she, naïvely, "I saw you on the steamer every day, somewhere, and the stewardess said you were a perfect gentleman."

Alton positively grinned to himself in the darkness. Heavens! What an inexperienced infant she was, in spite of all her assertions to the contrary. And she insisted that she was not a child,—yet she considered him "not a strange man" because, forsooth, she had spent six days and nights on the same ship which harbored him, and because the stewardess had characterized him as "a perfect gentleman." He wondered if she did not know that anyone who had favored a steward or his feminine counterpart with a sufficiently sizable gratuity would have the

A MODERN KNIGHT

doubtful distinction of being considered a "perfect gentleman" by either of those worthies! But loath to shake her childlike faith in the world which she knew so slightly, he only answered,

"A gentleman, surely,—I hope, though far enough from perfect! Perhaps it would help to make matters a little more conventional if I were to introduce myself,—Alton Fordyce,—late of Fairmead, Surrey, England,—disinherited,—now of — well, it remains to be seen where! Now, if you wish to be considered a 'perfect lady' you must tell me about yourself!"

The girl eyed him seriously for several moments.

"My name is Barbara Walton," she replied, simply, "and it won't take very long to tell you all about myself. What do you particularly wish to know?"

"First,—how do you come to be in this position?"

"You mean out here, at night,—with you?"

Alton had not meant that, literally, but he deemed it wiser to let it go at that, merely nodding his head in affirmation.

A MODERN KNIGHT

“ Well, you see, Aunt Eva was made to share my berth, so I would not be able to do anything without their knowing it,— and she’s worn out from her trip,— so, when she was sleeping soundly (I made her lie on the inside so she would get more air on her poor head,) I slipped out. I didn’t think anyone would be out here so late and — oh, I just can’t bear it! ” She drew a little sobbing breath before she came to the end of her explanation.

Fordyce was thoroughly nonplussed. “ Why aren’t you allowed to be alone? ” he finally inquired.

“ Because they’re afraid I’ll talk to people. ”

“ Then they wouldn’t approve of your talking to me? ”

“ Oh, you least of all,— you’re a *man!* ”

The look of complete bewilderment upon the Englishman’s face momentarily deepened, until he could restrain himself no longer, and burst out with,

“ My dear child,— you are more of a Chinese puzzle than you realize, I think! Don’t you suppose it would make it all clearer to me if you should tell me about it, in your own way, straight from the beginning, without my asking questions? ”

A MODERN KNIGHT

The girl shook her head a trifle but replied, simply, "I'll try."

.

"I'll try to tell you," she continued, after a long pause, "although it isn't an easy thing to put into words." This was followed by a sigh and an appealing glance, as if to ask him to make allowances for her. "This only began about eight months ago, when Mother and Dad were both killed in that awful railroad wreck, and I was left alone in the convent in France. You see, Mother and Dad had to live in a little western mining-town called Laredo, on account of Dad's health,—and they didn't think it a proper place in which to bring up a young girl, so I've been in the convent in Bon Air ever since I was ten years old. They always spent six weeks of every Autumn with me, though, and I have been home to Laredo to visit — three times. I loved it there at the convent,—it was so sweet and peaceful,—and when the news came about the accident, I was so alone and miserable that I agreed to the Superior's proposition that I become a nun, and never leave them. I was just about to enter the first week of my novitiate when I received a letter from

A MODERN KNIGHT

this uncle, whom I never even knew existed, saying that in a little while, he and my Aunt Eva would come over for me, as soon as they were all settled in their new home in Butte. I was just dreadfully glad that anyone should want me, and of course I was pleased and flattered at what Uncle wrote about wanting me to brighten up their quiet household, and I resolved to do my very best to make them love me, when, like a bolt from a clear sky, came the intelligence that when I came home with them it would be to marry their son, at once. I guess I was a little bit dazed, at first,—I couldn't see any reason for such a hurry about it,—but I found out from Sister Theresa that Dad had left an immense fortune, and then one of the older girls said that they probably wanted to keep the money in the family, and that was the only way they could see to do it! And besides, I don't want to be married, anyway,—I hate the very idea!”

“Poor child,” murmured Fordyce, sympathetically. “How old are you, anyway, if one may be permitted to ask that question of one of your sex?”

“I'm eighteen,—nineteen, next week, on my wedding-day,” answered Barbara, bitterly.

A MODERN KNIGHT

As the man failed to vouchsafe any further comment she continued, "They came for me, as you see, and have never taken their eyes off me since. I always have one or the other with me, and they sing Cousin John's praises all day long, until I hate his very name! On the steamer I did manage to speak to someone who was a lawyer, but before I could find out how far they could force my consent, here in America, they came on deck and discovered me, and since then Uncle has made Aunt Eva even sleep with me. I suppose this is the last free time I will have until afterwards,—till I am safely married, and oh! I am so afraid!"

"Afraid of what,—marriage, or Cousin John?" inquired Alton, mechanically, his mind busy with a problem in social economics.

"Both," exclaimed his companion. "Oh, can't you see, or is it because you're a man that you can't understand? How do I know that Cousin John is really nice? Or that I could even like him? Or that he would be good to me? I think he only wants my horrid money, anyway! I don't know any men,—you're the first man I ever really talked to, alone. Cousin John writes such horrid, common letters, and I do not like them! Oh, it would be so easy to escape

A MODERN KNIGHT

the whole thing by just going over there,—” (nodding to the rail,) “if I were really brave! Please don’t look so horrified,—there is nobody to care particularly,—you see I don’t know anybody but the convent sisters and this Uncle and Aunt.”

“Hush, little girl!” broke in Alton, reprovingly. “Don’t you even *think* such a wicked thing again! And do not say that there is no one to care, for you have interested me, tremendously, and I care, if nobody else does! I wonder if you cannot realize, Miss Walton, that you have made me a whole lot less lonely by confiding in me and giving me something to think about besides my own unprofitable self? I assure you I was heartily sick of that subject when you arrived upon the scene! It takes the sting out of one’s own loneliness to feel that one is needed, even if only as an outlet for bottled-up feelings.”

The girl watched him intently but said nothing. “Do you think you could steal away, to-morrow night, like this, and give me a chance to think this problem over a bit? I will do my level best to think up some way to rescue you from Cousin John,—believe me, I will!

A MODERN KNIGHT

He held out his hand and she frankly gave him hers,— a cold little hand which he held in both his own as he added, “ Now, good-night, little girl, and if you don’t come to me to-morrow evening I will find some way to communicate with you. Get a little rest now, and don’t despair, — we’ll outwit them yet, never fear! Au revoir! ”

When she had disappeared he sank back in his chair, lost in a profound reverie. What a child she was, in her innocent simplicity,— perfectly unconscious that there was anything at all out of the way in her spending two-thirds of the night on the observation platform of a trans-continental train, talking to a strange man! And her dislike of Cousin John — how absurd and childish — and yet she meant it, every word. Although not of an emotional or highly-strung temperament himself, Fordyce realized that underneath it all lay her feminine dread of marriage as a concrete fact, and the fear of what the future might hold for her of weal or woe. He puzzled over how he could help her until his brain seemed actually numb and refused to be goaded into any further activity, and as he once more lighted his pipe he remarked to the soft, enveloping darkness,

A MODERN KNIGHT

“ I declare, I don't see how anyone is to help her, short of marrying her, offhand, themselves. Why, I believe she'd marry even me, as an escape from Cousin John ! Once married, I defy anyone to make her miserable.”

He lingered in the neighborhood of this last idea, turning it over and over in his mind, and wondering if it could, in any way, be made a feasible solution of her difficulty. Why shouldn't he help her in that way, if it really seemed to be the only available one? She had trusted him (a perfect stranger!) to find some method of assistance,—would she trust him enough to marry him, he wondered? And then he could take her away to some distant city and settle her in a home of her own (he had no other attachment!)—and perhaps, in time, she might come to love him as he felt he could very easily care for her. If not,—well; there were ways of having a marriage such as theirs annulled or set aside, and when she became of age and was able to look out for herself, she could be released. Anyway, he had grave doubts as to whether a marriage in name only would be strictly legal and binding if anyone should see fit to make a test case of it.

A MODERN KNIGHT

His unemotional British heart had been stirred more deeply than he cared to admit, by the girl's story and her helpless winsomeness, and he felt certain that he could play the part which Fate had, to all appearances, marked out for him in her destiny, if only the girl herself should prove willing to take the chances.

.

After an all-day mental session over the pros and cons of his daring proposition, he was relieved to find the girl and her two guardians still in the same car with him after the change and the rather tedious wait at Chicago, but as the evening waned he began to despair of her coming out to him, and he had just ascertained the time to be twenty minutes after twelve when his ear caught the soft rustle of silken draperies, and he looked up to see her close beside him.

"Well?" she inquired, with naïve frankness, as she gave him her hand, "can you save me? Have you thought of anything? Or must it be Cousin John?"

To gain time to put his proposition before her in the least alarming manner, and because, in his day's deliberation over her case he had come to feel an almost proprietary interest in

A MODERN KNIGHT

the girl herself, he parried her question with another.

“ Do you know what time it is? ”

“ I couldn't get out any earlier,” she replied. “ You said to come whenever I could get away, didn't you? ”

“ Yes, but it is so very late, and people might talk about you — ”

As he uttered the banal remark he had a sudden realizing sense of how it must make him appear to the girl at his side, under the existing circumstances, and heartily did he wish the words unsaid, the instant they had passed his lips. The girl looked at him for a full minute with a childish, unwinking gaze which brought the blood to his cheeks,— then her face clouded and she said in a troubled tone,

“ But you said — ”

“ I know I said it! ” almost snapped Fordyce, as he moved a chair for her, a little back in the shadow. “ Forgive me, child, if I am not very consistent and if my ideas seem to lack coherence, for I have been cudgelling my poor brains for nearly the entire twenty-four hours, in a vain effort to let a little daylight in upon your queer predicament! ”

A MODERN KNIGHT

"A *vain* effort!" repeated his companion, apathetically. "That means that you can see no way out?"

"Pardon me,—it means that I can see no reasonable and conventional way out,—I can see *one* way, but frankly, it is a very peculiar and unconventional one, and I am a little afraid of how you will regard it. I will tell you about it as soon as you have answered a few necessary questions,—and you won't mind if I seem a bit inquisitive, will you?"

"No, indeed,—you are only too kind to try to help me."

"First, then,—you don't 'hit it off' very well with these relations, do you?"

"I certainly do not get along with them, if that is what you mean!"

"Exactly, only your manner of expressing it is much superior to mine! And you say you have absolutely no other relatives,—no one who might reasonably resent the rather drastic interference of a total stranger?"

"No one,—I really have no friends except the convent sisters, and the old foreman on Daddy's ranch."

"Well, you can't go back to the convent, that's sure,—because this uncle would simply

A MODERN KNIGHT

come and take you out again if he is as set upon this marriage as he appears to be. You can readily understand that? ”

“ Of course I know that I couldn't go back there,— and there isn't one soul to advise me, so you see you will have to usurp the rôle of a father to me and tell me very frankly what to do, if you will be so good! ”

Alton squirmed inwardly, at the implication of such a preponderance of years as her unconscious placing of him as a contemporary of her Father seemed to denote, but he mastered his incipient burst of irritation just in the nick of time and continued,

“ I am afraid it could hardly be considered the rôle of a father, Miss Walton, for I doubt if even the most irresponsible of parents could cook up as hair-brained a scheme as that which has been evolved in my mind today! I will tell you all about it as soon as you have answered one or two more questions. You have never seen this cousin of yours, you say? ”

“ No, only his picture. ”

“ Yet you feel so sure you won't like him? ”

“ Perfectly sure! I know I shall *hate* him! ”

“ Why so certain? ”

A MODERN KNIGHT

“ Because, if he is the kind of man he must be to have Uncle and Aunt so wrapped up in him, I know I never could stand him for a moment! ”

Alton smiled. She certainly was unsophisticated! He was conscious of an odd sense of warmth pervading him as he caught himself thinking that she would be a very dear little person to await one's nightly homecoming, and to speed one on one's way to business in the mornings.

“ One more question,” ended Alton, “ do you like me,— even a little bit? Can you bring yourself to trust me on such short acquaintance, do you think? ”

“ Two questions! ” smiled the girl, eager-eyed. “ I do like you a lot, you are so strong and kind to me! And I am perfectly sure you are to be trusted,— you look that kind! Why? ”

“ Because, as you seem to be ‘ at the end of your rope ’ as they say in this benighted country,— and as there seems to be no other way out of this mess for you,— (at least none which would not require more or less time, which is the one article we appear to be rather short of in this case,)— will you marry me, instead of Cousin John? ”

A MODERN KNIGHT

The eyes of the girl suddenly widened, and as she rested her chin on her palm and appeared to fall into a reverie, Alton hastened to add, "Truly, it is the only way I can see, Miss Walton! And before you hasten to answer in the negative, let me tell you a little about my scheme, as I mapped it out in my mind, last night. I'm a whole lot older than you." (Barbara nodded, musingly!) "Perhaps I appear really *old*, in your eyes,— " (There was no sign from his listener, as he half feared there would be, though he paused, perceptibly.) "Really, I am only thirty,— disinherited, it is true for the present, but with the tidy sum of nearly sixty thousand pounds in good, safe investments, in my own right. That is nearly three hundred thousand dollars of your American money, you know, so you can't think me merely a vulgar fortune-hunter, in need of your money,— I have no other attachment of any sort,— not one single soul in the world dependent upon me,— and frankly, I wish you *would* marry me! It is not good for any man or woman to live entirely alone, and I need an anchor to windward, myself, lest I merely drift with the current as so many men do,— to their eternal sorrow! You're not of age, and in this

A MODERN KNIGHT

enlightened era you could not hope to remain successfully hidden for two whole years, could you? If you will do me the honor of becoming my wife, I can at least protect you from all active annoyance, and I may be able to frustrate any designs which these relatives may have formulated regarding your money. If you can trust yourself to me, I will give you every possible care,—and if, in time, you can learn to like me enough so that we can be congenial chums, I could even be satisfied with that. You will be as free as the air you breathe, but it will be a brave person who dares to meddle with the happiness or affairs of Mrs. Alton Fordyce,—and do you know, I have grave doubts as to whether Uncle's long suit is bravery of any description,—moral *or* physical!"

Alton terminated what was, for him, a tremendously long speech, with a touch of the ludicrous, hoping thereby to break the spell of the girl's musing, for all the time he had been speaking, she had peered out at the flying landscape with unseeing eyes, and he was now in some perplexity to decide whether she had heard and understood his words, so inattentive had been her manner.

A MODERN KNIGHT

“Why are you doing this?” she asked, at length, without once moving or glancing up at the man as he stood before her, the picture of doubting hesitancy. “If it is only to help me, you are wonderful,—and it can’t be for yourself, because you get no benefit, that I can see,—only added responsibilities! I can’t see why you want to help me at such cost to yourself. Why do you?”

“If you choose to, you may put it that I am interested in checkmating any devilry which Uncle may have up his sleeve,—(I don’t take to Uncle a little bit, somehow!) and also that I would like to help you out of what begins to look like an extremely nasty predicament. You say that you like me a little,—I admit that I am strongly attracted to you,—so far,—good! Won’t you let me take those responsibilities of this step, about which you are worrying, upon my own shoulders? It will simplify matters amazingly, and when you come of age (if you wish it, then,) our marriage of convenience can be annulled,—a marriage in name only, can easily be set aside, I am very sure,—a sort of partnership, for business reasons, you see!”

There was a pause of several moments, which seemed at least an hour to Alton, before

A MODERN KNIGHT

she looked up and extended her hand to him, saying, soberly,

“I will agree, upon one condition,—if you ever have the faintest desire to be released before I am of age, you will honestly tell me so.”

Fordyce nodded his head emphatically, as he took the little hand, and holding it closely between both his own he said, softly, “You are doing a very brave as well as a very unusual thing, little girl, and I give you my solemn word of honor that you will never have cause to regret it through any word or act of mine! Now, for our plans! How can we manage to be married before you reach your destination? Are you to stop off anywhere?”

“Uncle said I might stop over in Salt Lake City, to buy some clothes for my trousseau,—but I told him I wouldn’t buy any for the world, so he is to stop over and I suppose Aunt Eva and I are to wait for him at some place where we change cars for Butte. He said he expected some important mail to meet him there at Salt Lake, and he was quite put out because we didn’t care to wait there for him.”

“Salt Lake,—h’m-m! That’s pretty good for our cause, I can tell you! Now, all you

A MODERN KNIGHT

have to do is to say that you have changed your mind about the clothes,— and stop over there and go shopping with Aunt Eva,— buy the prettiest trousseau you can pick out (Mrs. Alton Fordyce will need a tremendous number of pretty things, I assure you!) and then give Auntie the slip at some specified time, and meet me at a place I will manage to let you know about, later on. I think I know of someone in the city who will be able to help us. Will you be able to carry it out, do you think? ”

The girl had been regarding him steadily, with wide eyes, and now she simply nodded her head in assent and waited for him to continue. Then, appearing to think of something far from pleasant, her face clouded and her smooth forehead wrinkled as she ventured, timidly,

“ Will you care if the — the trousseau isn't very pretty? You spoke of it so particularly,— and it might not be pretty, you know, because Uncle won't like it if we spend much money on it,— and Aunt Eva will do the choosing for me, anyway. She said so,— and her taste is a little peculiar, to say the least.” She stopped in pretty confusion, and hung her head, shyly.

“ Of course I shall care what kind of clothes my wife wears,— I'm jolly particular about

A MODERN KNIGHT

such things,— but please don't let that worry you! Let her pick out whatever she likes for you, and then if you and I don't like 'em, we'll just pitch the whole accumulation to the dogs, and go out and buy a new lot,— together,— later! How about that? ”

.

While his lips were busy with these bantering speeches his mind was working with a lightning-like rapidity, and he was thinking how sweet and attractive she looked in her embarrassment, and what an insufferable cad was Uncle. Probably the child did not have one cent which she could call her own,— and among the shopping expenses there would be cab-fares and so forth, to reach their as yet unchosen meeting-place. He would give her some money, at once,— but, could he? He bethought himself that he must feel his way carefully before offering her any pecuniary assistance. With her sensitive temperament he knew that she would refuse to take anything from him, for her own sake, but if he could only put it in the light of a favor to himself, he felt almost sure that he could persuade her to do as he wished. If he could only think,— but wait! Suddenly

A MODERN KNIGHT

there popped into his head an old-time fancy of his earlier years, and he gave a genuine laugh of relief, as he said,

“Do you know, I’ve always cherished the idea that when I came to marry (if I ever did), I would persuade my fiancée to allow me to give her her wedding-gown,—but it doesn’t look as if you would be able to wait for a real bridal-robe, does it? But I am going to give you something to spend for me, and I want you to buy anything you like with it,—just so I can have some share in your pre-nuptial shopping. Will you do it to please me?”

Barbara flushed crimson, and protested.

“You know perfectly well that you are only doing this because you think I have no money, and that I am too proud to ask Uncle for any,—now, aren’t you?”

Fordyce gazed down upon her in mock dismay, exclaiming fearfully, “Great Caesar’s Ghost! Who would ever suppose that such a harmless little person as you appear to be could turn out to be a witch and a mind-reader? It does not augur very well for our peaceful future, does it? But, all joking aside, will you take it? It would please me more than you know! You see, I shall not be able to give you a real

A MODERN KNIGHT

wedding-gift (not the one I would like to, at least,) until I can get the news back to England, so please buy something for a keepsake until I can send across the water. I really wish you would!"

There was a wistful tone in the man's voice which touched a responsive chord in the lonely girl's being, and which impelled her to answer,

"I would rather not,—but I'll do it if you insist!"

"I *do* insist!" returned Fordyce, quick to see that his point was nearly gained. "And while I am in the mood for confessing, I may as well tell you that the only thing I regret about this hurried wedding is the lack of the usual white satin and orange-blossoms. Another pet delusion gone to smash! Please don't laugh at me, but I've always had a hazy idea that orange-blossoms were a necessary adjunct to a wedding,—the kind of thing which one could no more be married without than without one's gloves, for instance, or one's shoes,—and I think the only other really sentimental notion I have ever entertained has been about having my bride in conventional attire,—but we will have to forego that, too, so cheer up! Now I must send you off to bed, for it is very late (or

A MODERN KNIGHT

rather, early!!) and prospective brides should have rosy cheeks, you know! Can you get away in the morning, long enough to write a letter?"

"Yes, right after breakfast,—to Sister Theresa,—why?"

"Good! Then, early in the morning, before you are even up, I will slip a magazine into the lowest drawer of the corner writing-table, and in it I hope to have you find all the necessary information and directions. Now," drawing a hand from his pocket with something crumpled up inside it, "here's my contribution to the shopping excursion,—and good-night, my little bride-to-be. Leave everything to me, and don't you worry one bit! I have a scheme at the back of my head, and you'll find its result in your magazine in the morning."

Alton bent over her and lifted one slim hand reverently to his lips,—then gently raised her from her chair and watched her slip back into the car with something very like a sigh. It was going to be mighty hard not to become unduly fond of the shy, trusting little thing, who was so confiding and who depended upon him so completely,—and he caught himself thinking what a Heaven upon earth would be their home,—a

A MODERN KNIGHT

real home indeed,— if she could ever learn to care for him as he now felt only too miserably certain that he should care for her.

“ But this is wasting valuable time,” he muttered to himself as he rose and set out in search of the porter. “ Those things can be safely left to the care of the Future. Now for a telegraph-blank, and ‘ confusion to all cads,’ be they Uncles, Aunts or Cousin Johns,— it’s all one to me! ”

CHAPTER FOUR.



AT six o'clock that same morning, Alton Fordyce, not having been to bed at all, was seated in the reading-room of the steadily flying train, putting the finishing touches to the last item of a busy four hours work.

Item one,—had been to forcibly extract, from a very sleepy porter, the information that there *was* a telegraph-stop about an hour's ride ahead on the main line, and that messages could be sent from there, if necessary.

Item two,—had been the following message, put into the protesting porter's hand with a fee, whose proportions had caused that dusky-hued personage to open his eyes to their fullest extent, and impressed upon him, most thoroughly, the importance of sending that particular message, anyway.

A MODERN KNIGHT

On board train 157.
Southern R. R.

To
Rev. A. A. Allerton,
47 Jarvis Road, Salt Lake City,
Utah.

Am arriving Wednesday eleven,
with fiancée. Wish you to marry us.
Make arrangements for us, so there
will be no slip. Don't worry, will
explain when meet you at station.
Things all O. K. Answer at once to
Groverton, on board this train.

Fordyce, major.

Item three,— had been a letter to his father,
to be posted after the ceremony, and couched in
the following terms,—

Salt Lake City, Utah.

Dear Father,

In spite of your forcibly expressed
wish never to see or hear of me again,
until, as you so succinctly phrased it,
'I should come to my senses,' still it
may interest you to hear that, by the
time this reaches you at Fairmead, I
shall be married to a dear, sweet little
girl who does not seem at all afraid
to entrust her happiness to your worth-
less (!) son. I will refrain from

A MODERN KNIGHT

giving you any particulars, as just at the present juncture I fear they would have no interest for you, but please give my dear love to the Mater, and say to her that I know she will love Barbara, and that she may rest assured that I have done nothing in any way unworthy of the Fordyce name.

Your son, Alton.

Item four,—had been more of a task, but at last it had been satisfactorily accomplished. It was a long letter to Frances Stanhope, giving a detailed and accurate account of all the incidents leading up to his impending marriage, a full description of Barbara, as well as a synopsis of her story, and asking her to communicate with him, via Jarvis Road, as his future address was still uncertain, and tell him how his family bore the news. He also requested her to put his step-mother in possession of all the circumstances, as he had related them to her, but to tell no one else, not even Harry, anything save the bare fact that he was married.

By the time this writing was finished they were drawing into the station at Groverton where there was a short wait to permit the shifting of mail and express-cars, and to replen-

A MODERN KNIGHT

ish the water-tanks. As he had hoped, there was a telegram awaiting him at the tiny mud-colored office,— a message brief but comprehensive,— over which the big man smiled reminiscently. It read,—

Alton Fordyce, Esq.

On board S. R. train 157.

Station Groverton.

Will meet you with necessary papers.
Don't understand, but am willing to
take chance on your say so.

Allerton.

.

It was five o'clock when the train was well under way once more and Dawn was fast turning the dull gray of early morning into a rosy, pinkish glow when Fordyce leaned back and surveyed with a contented look a letter which was spread out before him. It was to the girl who was so soon to be his wife and had cost him unlimited thought and worry, for the big, boyish Englishman was not an adept at clothing his thoughts in their adequate garb of correct rhetoric, and he had found it very hard to express his exact meaning in cold black and white. But at last it was finished and he enclosed it in its envelope with a tender little smile. This,

A MODERN KNIGHT

with a copy of his message to his old friend, and his reply he slipped in between the pages of a magazine in the lower drawer of the writing-table and then fell into a reverie over the answer to his wire,—how characteristic it was of his old-time chum. What a stupendous piece of luck that Arthur should have settled in Salt Lake City, and how like him to accept his old friend's word that everything was all right and to back him up like that! Good old Arthur! He would be waiting when the train pulled in, and he wondered if ten years had made much difference in the quiet, reserved man whom he had continually teased and tormented, in years past, for his shyness and lack of "push." He remembered vaguely having heard that he had married, but when or whom he could not now recall, if, indeed, he had ever known,—and then their lives had drifted as far apart as the two poles,—as far apart as needs must the lives of two men whose temperaments and life-works are cut from widely differing patterns. At long intervals a cable or a written greeting had been exchanged, usually containing one or the other's change of address, but beyond that,—silence.

A MODERN KNIGHT

At breakfast Fordyce tried, without avail, to catch the eye of Barbara Walton, but she never once raised her eyes from her plate and he was most freezingly ignored by the rest of her party. Once he heard the clear, girlish voice raised a trifle, as if for his benefit, remark distinctly,

“ I’ve changed my mind about Salt Lake, Uncle! Auntie and I will go shopping and take the night train with you. If one *must* be married, whether one likes it or not, one might as well look as little like a fright as possible! ”

A few moments later, as they passed out of the car he caught the words,

“ I’m going to write a note to Sister Theresa, now, Aunt Eva,— any messages? ”

Alton would have dearly loved to take a seat in the reading-room and watch her, surreptitiously, as she perused the contents of the periodical which was awaiting her in the little desk, but he felt that, under the peculiar circumstances, it would be more than a little indelicate upon his part, so he was forced to continue his way regretfully toward his section, to gather up his belongings, preparatory to leaving the train.

It was over an hour before Barbara appeared with her letter to the Sister in her hand, and a

A MODERN KNIGHT

faint, pink flush mantling her cheeks. Alton had never beheld such a look as he received when their eyes met for the fraction of a second,— a mingling of immeasurable relief and complete trust, and he could almost have sworn that there was a tiny glimmer of a dawning personal interest in himself shining through the mist of tears which suddenly veiled their brightness, as her glance reluctantly fell away from his own. She appeared more nearly like other care-free, happy young girls than she had seemed since she had first crossed his path, and he appreciated that with a normal amount of happiness and loving care, she would blossom into a wonderfully attractive specimen of womanhood.

As her eyes turned away from him and the ghost of a smile faded from her lips, Alton, though not by any means what the world would consider a deeply religious man, breathed an unconscious petition that he might prove truly worthy of her great trust, and that, in time, the overflowing Cup of Happiness might be held to their lips.

CHAPTER FIVE.



AS Barbara Walton seated herself at the corner desk in the reading-room she noticed, with a throb of gratitude, that Aunt Eva had permitted herself to be enticed into the opposite corner of the small room by a pile of French fashion journals and had settled down contentedly with the length of the car between herself and her charge. As the girl opened the drawer, ostensibly to obtain writing-materials, she drew out the magazine and placed it in front of her where she could turn its pages, unobserved.

There were two envelopes, addressed to her, numbered one and two. The first one contained the two telegrams and a card of Alton's, bearing upon the reverse side the words "BE AT 47 JARVIS ROAD AT FOUR O'CLOCK, SHARP. TAKE A TAXI AND GIVE THE MAN THE ADDRESS AND YOU WILL BE ALL RIGHT. ALL O. K." On another sheet of paper he instructed her to lose herself

A MODERN KNIGHT

in the crowd at any one of the large stores,—leave by a side entrance, and meet him at Dr. Allerton's,—afterward he would whisk her back to the station and she could explain how, when she found herself separated from her chaperone, she had come right back to the station to wait until someone should come for her.

Barbara paused a long while before opening the second enclosure, and when she finally broke the seal she was glad that she was practically alone, for she felt the rosy color surge into her face. She gazed, almost in a species of terror, at the folded sheet which bore the words,—

To Mrs. Alton Fordyce: (to be!)
She unfolded it with trembling fingers and swiftly perused its contents.

My dear little Wife-to-be,—

Please read this carefully and then file the contents away in some safe and secure corner of your brain for future reference, because, with the completion of this letter, the perplexing subject of our future relations toward each other will be buried forever, so far as I am concerned. I can hardly realize that, in your enormous trustfulness and your complete ignorance of the world, you are giving

A MODERN KNIGHT

your dear little self and your future happiness into my hands, but, although I am a 'mere man' as you, yourself, once intimated, still I can understand something of what you must be feeling as you read this letter. You have honored me by confiding in me, and in return I will tell you a secret,—which is that I am just as lonely and forlorn as you are, and that I feel that we can be the best chums in the world. And that is just what I intend we shall be for as long as My Lady chooses! I shall take delight in giving you every care and luxury in my power, and in return I only ask that you shall be happy and truly like me as much as possible. But, dear little girl,—if the time ever comes when you can truthfully say that you *do* care (as I shall hope and pray that you some time can!) remember that I'm trusting you to come to me and tell me so quite frankly,—and I will make the telling as easy as possible, you may be sure! Is it too much to ask of you?

I must tell you, in extenuation of such a frightfully long letter, that you have already found the vulnerable spot in this supposedly immune heart of mine, and I fear that even your

A MODERN KNIGHT

own desire could not now dislodge you from your place in my thoughts. Of course, before the world, you are my wife, and we must take pride in playing our parts so well that even our intimate friends (if we make any), shall never even suspect the "rift within the lute." Everything shall be exactly as you decide, now and always, and you are to feel perfectly free to come to me at any time with anything that worries or bothers you. Au revoir, now, little Child-wife o' Mine, and God grant that you may never have cause to regret your trust and faith in him who is so soon to be your husband.

Always steadfastly yours,
Alton Fordyce.

With shining eyes and flushed cheeks the girl re-read the epistle which had cost Alton so much careful thought and planning, and then tucked it snugly away in her diminutive wrist-bag, beside the papers containing the directions. The letter was written on very thin, foreign-looking paper, gray in color, with a modest, black A. F. in cipher, and a tiny coronet above

A MODERN KNIGHT

the interlaced letters. As Barbara sat pondering, she thought how exquisitely neat the whole thing appeared,— how exactly like the writer — just as clean-cut and straight to the point,— and she wondered if, in the course of time, she might not be forced to admit that he had won his place in her affections, even as he now assured her of her own unconscious conquest over him. Suddenly realizing that she needed some letter to show for her prolonged sojourn in the writing-room, she hastily dashed off a few lines of love and homesickness to Sister Theresa in her quiet convent, and calling her aunt, returned to her seat to make her preparations for departure.

.

Across the bright, beautiful morning heavy, leaden clouds had been rapidly gathering and before the train had approached its destination the whole aspect of the day had undergone one of those sudden changes so peculiar to the North American climate. Driving sheets of rain were sweeping athwart the landscape, pounding upon the windows and trickling in miniature rivulets off the car roof and the window-sills. On the whole it was rather a dreary and disheartening moment for the embarkation of such an enterprise as Barbara had in hand, but, a little to

A MODERN KNIGHT

his surprise, Alton heard her actually laughing and insisting that their original shopping excursion be adhered to in spite of the threatening weather,— and she was rewarded by the cheery appearance of a few pale and watery gleams of sunshine, just as they drew into the station at Salt Lake.

In the bustle of leaving the train her two guardians failed to notice that the tall Englishman followed them down the steps, but Barbara, observing out of the corner of her eyes, comprehended at once the identity of the slim, slightly bent man in the clerical garb who, totally unheeding his surroundings, seized both Alton's hands and marched off with his arm linked tightly in that of his friend and a beaming smile of welcome upon his delicately chiseled countenance.

As she was escorted by her aunt into a cab (after many adjurations from the man, anent his wife's losing sight of her charge), Barbara held tightly to her little black wrist-bag, and her small traveling bag. In the former were her handkerchief, a letter from Sister Theresa, received on board the steamer, a small paste-board box, containing the few but valuable articles of jewelry sent to her by the coroner at

A MODERN KNIGHT

the time of her parents' tragic ending, the card and letter from Fordyce, and the two crisp bank-notes which he had crushed into her hand the evening before. She had never seen bills of such large denominations and she wondered if she would be able to get them changed at some shop or if she would be obliged to go to a bank to avoid exciting any undue comment. Her simple, unspoiled mind, utterly unused to the slightest prevarication or intrigue of any description, was beginning to feel the exhilaration incident to such a radical departure from its accustomed habits, and almost before she was aware of the fact she found herself perfecting a plan of escape from her aunt, even down to its most minute details.

Buying a trousseau, under the most favorable conditions, is far from being a simple and easy matter, and the acquisition of even a modestly proportioned one, under Aunt Eva's supervision, resolved itself into a species of dreadful nightmare to Barbara. In an incredibly short space of time, and in spite of her secret, as well as openly expressed preference for the more quiet grays and violets which accorded more with her feelings of recent bereavement, she found herself the disgusted and horrified pos-

A MODERN KNIGHT

essor of a green and silver evening-gown,— a crushed-strawberry afternoon costume,— a violent blue and black street suit, adorned with some two dozen round, gilt buttons,— and a hat which would have caused even Broadway to catch its breath and look askance,— so fearful and wonderful was its construction.

It seems to be a peculiar fact that the more subdued and restrained a woman is,— the more repressed her natural instincts are,— the more drab and colorless her entire existence has been,— when the long-coveted and vaguely hoped-for opportunity at last opens out before her, her fancy runs riot, and her purchases are more likely to resemble a gigantic rainbow, gone thoroughly crazy, than anything else upon this planet!

As Barbara watched her aunt, she could not help wondering at the elder woman's almost childlike delight in the bright colors and beautiful materials spread out before her. The more calm and unruffled of the two women was convent-bred Barbara who, until this moment, had never even stepped inside of a large store, in her life, and to whom everything was entirely new and strange. Her aunt was like some poor, color-starved soul, having its fill of mere sens-

A MODERN KNIGHT

uous beauty for the first time, and the girl could not bear to discourage her enthusiasm, although some of the combinations of color were not only startling but actually hideous. Poor Barbara could scarcely restrain her tears while the atrocious gowns were being tried on and re-fitted for her, and it seemed to her, in her recent grief, little short of a sacrilege to be obliged to parade up and down, peacock-like, in garments which were a shock to every sensitive fibre in her composition and against which every artistic feeling rose in revolt.

At last came luncheon, in a restaurant on the top floor of one of the large shops, and after that function had been satisfactorily disposed of, the topic of an evening-wrap came up for discussion. Barbara inclined very strongly toward a soft gray velvet in the show-case in the shop where they were at that moment lunching, but Aunt Eva's heart was set with a mulish obstinacy upon a Nile-green satin affair with numerous strappings of black and gold, which she remembered seeing in one of the other shops which they had patronized, during the morning. The one question of price being the only matter which Aunt Eva considered worth disputing about,—Barbara stubbornly insisted that the

A MODERN KNIGHT

price of the green one was almost double the price of the gray,—and her aunt, by this time thoroughly tired out by her unaccustomed shopping debauch, said, ruefully,

“If I wasn’t so dead tired I’d go right back and find out about that other one! I do wish I knew, for certain!”

Barbara’s heart sang at the thought that Fate had thrown her a much better avenue of escape than any she could have manufactured for herself, but she took care that her elation should not show upon her usually tell-tale face as she ventured, tentatively,

“Don’t you think that I might be able to go back and find out,—and then come and tell you? I’m certain I could find the store again.”

“I’m sure I don’t know what your uncle would say,” returned the elder woman, “but I *do* like that green one for you,—and I just can’t walk another step until I’m rested,—and you might get lost in this big city,—and besides,—how long do you think you would have to be away?”

“Probably an hour or more, allowing for delays, and not getting waited upon at once,” hazarded Barbara.

A MODERN KNIGHT

Aunt Eva hesitated for some time, torn between the Scylla of her husband's certain displeasure if her lapse of duty should come to his knowledge, and the Charybdis of her innate desire, as a shopper, to secure a bargain. Finally the green and gold creation won the day and she capitulated.

"Well, if you'll be back in an hour, I'll risk it! You can go and I'll wait in the ladies' parlor for you. And perhaps, by that time, my feet will be rested. Here's a dollar, for carfares and things, and do hurry,— or we won't have time to buy the rest of your things before the stores close for the night!"

Barbara tried to listen with an unconcerned air, but she gave a little gasp of relief as she finally disappeared down the elevator to the street floor.

The elder woman, left to her own devices, (and a little bit to the not over comfortable beratings of a tardily awakened conscience!) repaired to the ladies' waiting-room, on the fourth floor of the building. It was a large, cool, half-dusky room, lined with mirrors, and with palms and easy chairs scattered carelessly about, and along the walls, on two sides, ran rows of the most seductive looking leather

A MODERN KNIGHT

couches she had ever seen. For a while the weary woman sat primly in an arm-chair watching the people come and go, but at last the mute invitation of those sofas was no longer to be ignored, and, with a glance at the clock, she removed her hat and settled herself upon the most secluded of them, murmuring softly,

“ I'll just snatch ‘ forty winks ’ before she comes back and I'll be a new woman. It lacks three quarters of an hour, yet, to the time, and I told her where to find me.”

Almost before her thoughts had taken definite form, her eyes had closed and she had gently drifted off into the arms of Morpheus.

CHAPTER SIX.



BARBARA experienced a feeling of unbounded relief as she emerged from the street door into the passing crowd and was promptly swallowed up in the throng of hurrying shoppers.

She knew exactly what she had planned to do, and she was not at all sure how much time she could spare, as she had no idea how long it would require to reach her ultimate destination. Dr. Allerton's house might be ten minutes or an hour from her present location, for all she knew to the contrary, and she reflected that it would be dreadful if she were to be late to her own wedding. It was only two o'clock now, and four was the appointed hour,—yet she dared not risk any unnecessary delay!

In what had been left of the night after her talk with Alton, she had done some very serious thinking, and her impressionable mind had mapped out a course of procedure, involving Fordyce's monetary contribution, which no one

A MODERN KNIGHT

save a girl, reared amid the dreamy, old-world surroundings of a French convent, could have planned. With her little head full of the fairy-tales and olden time stories which had formed the greater part of her lighter reading for so many years, the big, kindly Englishman had come into her life in just as miraculous a manner as that in which the Prince was wont to come to the rescue of the "distressed damsels" in the old legends. So Barbara's innocent heart had arisen to proclaim him the Knight and Conqueror,—who was to set the imprisoned maiden free, and then live happily with her forever after! Did not all the old tales run exactly so? And surely, no ancient Prince Charming could have looked more comely and fitted for the part than this wholesome young Briton appeared in the eyes of this particular "distressed damsel" whom he was setting out so energetically to rescue.

She would have her Father's ring, which was in her possession, looked over and cleaned and Alton should have it when they were married,—at least she should not be quite a "pauper bride,"—and she rather thought her dead Father would approve of her making that use of it. She reflected that the big, boyish Eng-

A MODERN KNIGHT

lishman was just such a man as her Father would have admired, and a glow of gratitude had pervaded her being, there in the stuffy little berth, dimly illumined by the first faint streaks of dawn, as she breathed a prayer of thankfulness that he should have been so providentially despatched to her assistance. In the morning, after receiving his letter, the remainder of her self-imposed, mystical task had taken definite form in her mind,— she would buy a locket (she had always secretly longed to possess one, anyway!)— a locket with space enough in it to hide the sheet of thin paper on which the man had poured out his feelings so frankly,— and that letter (which Barbara rightly called her first love-letter), should lie securely hidden there until, perhaps, the time should come when she could lay it in his hand as a tacit admission of her love for him, and her gratitude for his manly protection of her.

She hurried down the main thoroughfare until she came to a bank which, to her untutored mind, appeared pretentious enough not to be astonished at her desire to have her two one-hundred-dollar bills changed into money of less conspicuous denominations. Here she proffered her request and her two crisp notes, rather

A MODERN KNIGHT

tremulously, and was startled at the clerk's pleasant, "Good afternoon, Miss Grayson,—glad to see you back,—any particular way you would like to have it?"

Barbara could not have told what she managed to say in reply, but she found herself in the street again with what seemed to her a bag *full* of rustling paper money before the realization came to her that, with her heavy black veil over her face, the affable clerk must have mistaken her for someone else whom she evidently strongly resembled. How easy it had all proved,—and how dreadfully it had worried her beforehand! She smiled, fleetingly, to herself, as she caught herself hoping that this first incident might be a good omen for the remainder of her undertaking.

Her next stop was at an imposing jewelry establishment where she handed the attendant a heavy, masculine-looking ring, bearing one magnificent stone in a Gypsy-setting, with instructions to have it cleaned and put in order while she made some other purchases. These consisted of a fine gold chain, delicate as a thread but of unusual strength, and a handsome heart-shaped locket, beautifully engraved on both sides and with several tiny stones set in the

A MODERN KNIGHT

face. Then the man, under her direction, removed the picture-holders from inside the case while she carefully folded and re-folded a piece of paper from her bag until it was small enough to be crowded into the cleared space inside the trinket.

"Can you fix it so it cannot be opened?" she asked the attentive salesman who had been watching her maneuvers with undisguised curiosity.

"It can be done,—with a small rivet, but it might mar its looks," was the reply.

"Never mind that,—how quickly can you do it?" she demanded.

"About ten minutes," responded the now thoroughly interested clerk.

"I'll wait!" was the brief reply he received, and he was forced to retire to the back work-room, still wondering about the childish little figure in the mourning garb, which had taken a seat directly facing the huge clock, with an air of being about to wait exactly the designated ten minutes and not one instant longer.

It was much nearer twenty than ten minutes, and the girl was beginning to grow restless, before the clerk returned, bearing the ring as well as the locket. Barbara scrutinized both

A MODERN KNIGHT

objects carefully, laid five twenty dollar bills, two tens and a five upon the glass case,—popped her purchases into her bag and hurried out, after ascertaining from the salesman the location of the nearest taxi-cab stand. She noticed that it was exactly quarter of three when she gave the man the address and climbed into the rickety vehicle, and in just three minutes more she found herself stopping before a pretty cottage-house, set well back from the street, possessing an air of quiet dignity and seclusion in the midst of the flowers and shrubs which surrounded it, and looking strangely out of place in the encircling business and commercial district. As her driver opened the door of the cab for her he favored her with the inquisitive scrutiny of one who marveled that anyone should take a conveyance for such an insignificant distance.

“Are you *sure* this is the right place?” inquired Barbara, nervously.

“Sure t’ing,” replied the man, eyeing her curiously, “47 Jarvis Road, you said,—Reverend Allerton’s ’ouse,—didn’t ye?”

Barbara could not recall having mentioned any name in connection with her destination but she hastened to say, “Yes! It’s all right then!”

A MODERN KNIGHT

and dropping a coin into the man's extended palm she hurried up the trim box-bordered walk toward the house.

"Your change, Miss," called the chauffeur, after her retreating figure.

"Please keep it," answered Barbara, giving him one of her rare smiles as she pressed the bell.

As she waited impatiently for some response to her ring she began to be nervous over her premature arrival and to wonder what she should do if no one proved to be at home so early. But her reflections were cut short by the abrupt opening of the portal, disclosing the man whom she had noticed in the station earlier in the day, and whose countenance inspired her with an instant confidence and liking. His cordial smile and earnest pressure of her hand as he drew her inside the house were sufficient to banish any misgivings which Barbara might have entertained, and she gave a sigh of relief as he said, cheerfully,

"Come in, my dear,— come right in! Mr. Fordyce isn't here, as yet, but I shall enjoy having a cosy chat with you. Your name is Walton, I believe he said,— from Laredo? I wonder if you can be any relation to a man out

A MODERN KNIGHT

there, for whom I entertain the greatest respect and affection,—George B. Walton, the owner of the ‘2BarA’ ranches and mines of that place? ”

Astonished and speechless, Barbara followed mechanically into the clergyman’s little study and allowed herself to be ensconced in a huge chair near the window (a chair so capacious that she was almost swallowed up in its vast depths!) before she recovered her voice sufficiently to inquire, “What did you say your friend’s name is? ”

“George Walton — George Bradlee Walton, of Laredo, Montana.”

“Why,—he — he was — my — father! ” faltered the girl, her eyes brimming over and her hands searching blindly in her bag for an elusive handkerchief.

The man before her started,—then crossed the room swiftly and stood beside her with a look of horror upon his expressive features.

“You say —*was*? Surely you do not mean that he is — ? ”

“Yes,—he is d-dead,—and my mother, also! ” assented the forlorn little figure in the big chair, and her breath caught in a quick, convulsive sob.

A MODERN KNIGHT

The clergyman soothed and comforted the overwrought child as best he could, and when she began to grow calmer he recounted to her the manner of his meeting with her father and their subsequent friendship. He spoke of how, four years before, when his own young bride of less than a year had been ordered West for her health, he had made the journey with her, and on the train had formed the acquaintance of Mr. and Mrs. Walton, who, in their turn, had seemed profoundly interested in both his wife and himself. When they learned the ultimate destination of the young couple they would not listen to their continuing the journey as they had planned, but insisted that Mrs. Walton remain with them on their ranch in Laredo. As Mr. Walton had completely recovered his own health in that locality he had great faith in its efficacy in the case of their guest, and when the minister was forced to return to his duties it was with a thankful heart that he had left his adored wife with these friendly people. His voice broke as he continued the narrative with a visible effort.

“Edith stayed there nearly a year, and then — the end came — very peacefully and suddenly. Little girl,—if your parents had been my own brother and sister they could not

A MODERN KNIGHT

have been more devotedly kind to us both! When I brought Edie back here — to our own little cemetery — they came with me,— and nursed and tended me through the long illness which claimed me afterwards. Since then I have always seen them two or three times each year until last winter, when I went out to the old place, only to learn from the foreman that they had gone abroad, very unexpectedly, to pay a surprise visit to their daughter who he said was in school somewhere over there. Since then I have often wondered at receiving no news, either of or from them,— but now, I understand!" A long pause, and then, "Was it some accident,— or how?"

With her hand closely clasped in Dr. Allerton's, Barbara poured out the story of her bereavement, the coming of her uncle and aunt and all the rest of the tale,— her meeting with Fordyce, and his plan for her "rescue," as she whimsically called it,— and she failed to notice that at one part of her narrative Dr. Allerton's fingers tightened their grasp upon her own and he seemed about to interrupt,— then evidently thought better of it and relapsed once more into interested silence. It was an immense relief to Barbara, just to talk freely to this kindly-faced

A MODERN KNIGHT

man who had been her dead father's friend, and she had no idea how much she was disclosing until she saw him endeavoring to suppress a smile, and immediately appreciated that she had just repeated Alton's laughing remark anent "white satin and orange blossoms."

Dr. Allerton rose briskly as she fell suddenly silent and said banteringly,

"My dear young lady, let me inform you that you are going to marry the man whom, of all men in this world, I have always admired and cared for the most!" Then as the girl's face was lighted by a wan little flicker of a smile, he added, "Now, you are to sit quite quietly here and rest awhile,—and from now, on, this end of the affair is entirely in my hands!"

Barbara snuggled back in the big chair and lazily wondered what Aunt Eva could be about, and just how much of an upheaval there would be upon their next meeting, which would probably take place in the waiting-room, if all went well. If only some kind Fate would see to it that Aunt Eva did not arrive until after she did, and then Mr. Fordyce could be somewhere near to prevent things from becoming too unpleasant! She was very comfortable, and more than ordinarily weary from her sleepless night and

A MODERN KNIGHT

the nervous excitement, and she must have fallen into a light doze, for she was startled to hear Dr. Allerton's voice and to see him once more standing beside her.

"Now, my dear," he was saying, "you have a full half hour before the ceremony,—this,—" turning and disclosing a stout, motherly-appearing woman, who curtsied at the words, "is my housekeeper, Mrs. Grant, who manages all my affairs,—(and me, too, whenever she *can*!) and will you go upstairs with her and make yourself comfortable? I would do a great deal for George Walton's only daughter, and anything on earth for Alton Fordyce,—so please accept the wedding-gift you will find waiting for you, upstairs! They belonged to my wife,—but having no one to cherish them when I am gone, I would dearly like Mrs. Alton Fordyce to have them. I like to feel that they are in good hands. Run along, now, and don't you dare to put in an appearance before the stroke of four! I must have an important talk with Alton!"

.

On entering the cheerful little chintz-hung bedroom upstairs, in the wake of the motherly and excited housekeeper, the girl gazed, in speechless bewilderment, at the cloud of filmy

A MODERN KNIGHT

whiteness upon the bed. As she brushed her hand across her eyes to make sure she was really awake, she heard Mrs. Grant exclaiming, volubly as she removed the hat from Barbara's unresisting head,—

“An' so, himself comes to me, an' tells me that there's goin' to be a weddin' in this house in half an hour,—an' for me to go an' get out his poor, dead wife's weddin'-gown, an' all the fixin's from the trunk,—an' get everythin' a young lady would need to get married in,—an' that I was to put 'em on the only person alive that himself would be willin' to see 'em on,—so I guess they're to go on you, Miss,—an' I'm guessin' they're a-goin' to be about right!”

“Do you mean to tell me,” gasped Barbara, “that Dr. Allerton means me to wear his poor young wife's wedding things?”

“He sure do,—poor misguided man,—an' himself stood over me at the trunk, to make sure I didn't lave nothin' out, too,—he did!”

Barbara could say nothing,—her heart was too full! Why were people so good to her? Now Mr. Fordyce could have his wish about his bride's being in the conventional attire! How Dr. Allerton must care for his old friend to do such a great thing for him! And what a won-

A MODERN KNIGHT

derful person Mr. Fordyce must be, to inspire such an affection in another man!

A few bright tears fell over the exquisitely hand-wrought lingerie as Barbara allowed herself to be arrayed in it,—(for Mrs. Grant clung to the old tradition that a bride should never lift a finger toward robing herself for her own wedding!) and she went down on her rheumatic old knees to encase the bride-elect's feet in creamy, white silk hose and little white satin slippers with knots of orange-blossoms on the toes, such as the little convent recluse had never before seen. Her austere convent training having succeeded in rendering her totally unconscious of any personal charms of her own, the girl held her breath when the time came to slip on the first little white shoe,—she feared it would never go on, it looked such a tiny thing,—and her astonishment was unbounded at the discovery that it was actually loose upon her own dainty foot. At last she was completely arrayed in the gown and veil,—the gown, a quaint affair of clinging, soft white satin and old lace with what seemed to Barbara (who had never witnessed a wedding, in her life,) a most unnecessary amount of train,—and the veil, a square of tulle, edged with old

A MODERN KNIGHT

rose-point lace and caught up with a dainty wreath of orange-blossoms.

The tall, old clock on the stair landing was just booming out the first deep stroke of four when Barbara crept to the head of the stairs and paused there, leaning against the railing, too timid to go down alone. As she waited, her heart madly pounding and her breath coming in little gasps, the study door below her opened and Dr. Allerton looked out into the hall. Meeting her supplicating glance, he started toward her, exclaiming, brightly,

“ Ah,— here she is, now! ”

CHAPTER SEVEN.



AS Barbara disappeared upstairs with Mrs. Grant, the Reverend Arthur Allerton stood perfectly still and watched her until she had rounded the corner in the hall above and was completely hidden from his view. Then, with a gentle, half-amused smile he returned to his study, to sit with clasped hands under his chin and his elbows propped upon the table, evidently puzzling over some manifestly perplexing problem connected with his recent visitor until a firm tread across the piazza brought him to the door with a rush to greet his friend.

"I want to ask you a few questions, old man," he said hurriedly, pulling the taller man after him into his sanctum, "and you're not to do one single thing until I'm through, except to look as intelligent as your natural limitations will permit (as we used to say, in college!),—and answer me. You said Miss Walton was in the care of her uncle and aunt, didn't you?"

A MODERN KNIGHT

"You know very well I did,— why? "

"Never mind,— for the moment. Is it her *paternal* uncle? "

"I judge so,— his name being also Walton."

"What sort of appearing man is he,— can you describe him? "

"Beastly unattractive, Arthur, I must say! Exceedingly thin and tall. Too much forehead and altogether too little chin. About the most unprepossessing specimen it has ever been my lot to gaze upon! "

"And you say the girl never saw him until he came for her? "

"She said she never even knew her father had a brother."

"Well, *he never did have!* " exploded the clergyman. "There is some trickery at work here which ought to be investigated before you go any farther! "

"What do you mean to imply? " thundered Fordyce, springing to his feet at the words. "Do you think that sweet child is capable of a trickery so base,— so — "

"Hold hard, Sonny! Not so fast! " answered Allerton, laying a restraining hand on the excited man's shoulder and forcing him back

A MODERN KNIGHT

into his arm-chair. "Don't go jumping at conclusions like a colt at a fence! All I mean is that this man is no more that child's uncle than you or I. Her father, George Bradlee Walton, was a good friend of mine, and I know from his own lips that he was an only child,—as was his wife, also. Now, what this game is, I confess I can't for the life of me make out,—but it seems to be a plot with this man posing as the girl's uncle in order to get her married to his son and incidentally, to control her fortune, in all probability. But even that would be pointless unless there were some clause in the dead man's will which provides some form of a trust until a specified time. Perhaps until she comes of age, or something of that sort! Two or three years would be ample time for a clever manipulator to realize quite a nice little haul before the title and control reverted to the rightful heir,—if, indeed, it ever did come to her!"

"Exactly," agreed Fordyce,—then suddenly seized with another and more startling idea,—“and, fortuitously, the girl might die,—Arthur? Is that what you had in mind, but don't quite like to say it?”

Allerton nodded his head slowly, then added, “But I don't believe it would go that far,—

A MODERN KNIGHT

although strange things do happen out here in this country,—stranger than you would believe possible, Alton.”

Both men sat silent, gazing straight in front of them,—Fordyce, with a set mouth and a worried look in his eyes,—and Allerton, with the rapt, dreamy expression and the half-smile of one who communes with souls beyond the veil of our finite world. At last he spoke.

“You see, old chap, there’s no absolute need for you to marry her now, because I could go back to the station with you and face that scoundrel down, this minute, and prove him an impostor. He can’t force her to marry his son if she knows the truth!”

.

Again they lapsed into silence, and for many minutes nothing was heard in the secluded study but the regular breathing of the two men and the ticking of the busy little mantel-clock,—punctuated now and then by a deep-drawn sigh from the young Englishman as he brooded over this startling and unforeseen development. At last the clergyman spoke, slowly and quietly.

“Fordyce,—there’s no use talking,—I like that little girl upstairs,—she seems to me

A MODERN KNIGHT

to have a very sweet nature,—one of those characters which, in the right environment, will grow and unfold till the whole is as lovely as a newly blown rose, shedding sweetness upon all its surroundings. I think she will make an ideal companion — a wonderful wife — for the right man! But are *you* the right man, do you think? ”

There was no immediate answer and the minister asked again,

“ Are you the man? Do you realize what is before you? ”

Fordyce did not speak,—merely nodded acquiescence.

“ Do you realize,” continued the clergyman, “ where this Don Quixote idea of yours is going to lead you? Barbara is merely a child, as yet,—not mature enough to know what the responsibilities of marriage mean and if — ”

“ French girls are often married as young as she is and the great majority of them are happy! ” cut in his listener.

“ I know, I know,— ” returned the other, hastily, “ but Barbara is *not* a French girl, in spite of her upbringing, and every atom of Young America in her composition will come to the surface again, now that she is back in her

A MODERN KNIGHT

native country. I do not believe that she has the remotest idea what she is doing in giving herself into your keeping."

"I suppose I might as well tell you, first as last, Arthur, that this thing started out to be purely a marriage of convenience,—(she to be my wife, in name only, as long as she chooses), and she is to be released when she comes of age if she so desires. But she did promise to tell me if the time ever came when she could *really* care for me as I would like to have her. So you needn't worry over her responsibilities,—the only duty she owes me is to respect the name she will bear, and to at least *seem* happy."

Allerton looked long and intently at his friend as if he would probe to the very bottom of his soul and pass judgment upon his innermost thoughts. Then he shook his head solemnly.

"So *that's* the idea, is it? She takes all and gives nothing in return? Alton, how long do you think a woman who amounted to anything would be content with such an unfair arrangement as that?"

Obtaining no answer from the man at his side, he continued to address him.

A MODERN KNIGHT

“Think, Fordyce! Think what this crazy idea of yours (for I presume it *is* yours!) is going to mean to you, if not to her! She is so very young—you will have ahead of you perhaps years of patient waiting for the awakening of the real woman-soul in her,—these dreamy, convent-bred girls usually develop so slowly,—and when you have taken every care of her, wrapped her round with your thoughtfulness and companionship,—worked for her,—worried over her,—mourned and rejoiced with her,—given her the best years of your life with practically no adequate return from her,—after all these things, have you stopped to consider that she may *never* learn to care enough? That she may demand her freedom when she is older and senses her anomalous position more fully?”

“Yes,—I’ve thought of that,” answered Alton, quietly.

“But—have you thought that, in time, you may come to really care for her in a way that would be nothing short of torture to you if she were to remain indifferent?”

Allerton was startled at the look upon his companion’s face.

A MODERN KNIGHT

“Good Lord, man!” answered Alton through clenched teeth, “are you as blind as the proverbial bat? Can’t you see that the mischief is *done*, already? She is an unusually lovable little person and I do care, now, more than I would have believed myself capable of caring for anyone! And I *do* know just what I have let myself in for, but I am strong enough to go through with it, I tell you! I’m willing and anxious to take my chances of gaining her love in the end,—if I could only be sure that it is the honorable thing to do, in the light of these last incidents!”

“Why don’t you leave it to the girl? I could suggest it to her for you,” offered Allerton.

“I’m no shirk! I’ll ask her myself,—tell her enough without revealing the ugly facts in all their enormity,—but, if she still elects to marry me, I can’t help feeling that it will be our best chance of tracking down these scoundrels,—for after the ceremony, here, I should want to have her go on with their plans, just as though nothing had happened, and at the last available moment catch the whole bunch, red-handed,—a nice little family party. We’d have sufficient time to make an investigation and get a

A MODERN KNIGHT

line on the game before Cousin John's wedding was ready to come off. But of course she shall decide,—where is she?"

"Upstairs,—dressing, I believe," returned Allerton, nonchalantly,—then noting the surprised expression which flitted across Fordyce's face, he added, "It is the first time I've had the privilege of 'dressing a bride,' and I am more or less anxious about the result, myself."

"What do you mean?" inquired Alton with interest.

"I mean that I have presented your little bride with my own Edith's wedding finery,—gown, and I *hope*, all the necessary accessories; no need to thank me!" as the big man seemed about to speak; "there is no one to have them after I am gone, and I have a feeling that, with her romantic temperament, she will cherish them, for more reasons than one. Ah! here she is now!" he finished, opening the door and smiling up into her frightened little face as she leaned against the railing in the hall above.

Barbara never had a very clear idea of how she traversed the space intervening between the stair-head and the study; everything whirled

A MODERN KNIGHT

before her eyes, and she was only conscious that she was clinging desperately to someone's hand, and supposed it to belong to Dr. Allerton, until she found herself placed gently in the same huge chair which she had before occupied, and saw the clergyman at his corner desk with his back turned toward her, making a strong effort to master the emotion caused by the sight of his wife's wedding garments. Then it dawned upon her that the hand which she was still clasping so closely was the property of the large man who was bending above her with a look on his honest face which caused her heart to behave most remarkably, and she released her hold in pretty confusion, as he whispered breathlessly,

"Oh, my dear, my dear! Has my old boyhood's dream come to life?"

Before she could frame any suitable answer Dr. Allerton came forward with both hands extended, and advancing to her side said, earnestly,

"Thank you, my dear;—for understanding, and wearing the things. It is a great pleasure to me. But now there is something which Alton feels he ought to ask you before we call in our witnesses."

A MODERN KNIGHT

"Miss Walton," began Fordyce, haltingly, "do you remember telling me, night before last, that you didn't wish to be married to your cousin:—in fact, that you did not wish to marry anyone, if you could possibly help it?"

The girl nodded a very decided affirmative.

"You were also good enough to admit that you like me a little, didn't you? And, anyway, you preferred me to Cousin John?"

"Yes," she answered, briefly.

"If you were perfectly free to choose now,—if you needn't marry anybody unless you particularly wanted to,—if facts had come to light which proved that your uncle had absolutely no power to make you obey him,—would you still choose to become my wife as we planned it, last night?"

Barbara had risen and was gazing at her two companions with wide, troubled eyes, as if to read their inmost thoughts. It was disappointing to Dr. Allerton to notice how strained was the expression on Fordyce's face as he waited for the girl's answer. At last her voice broke across the silence of the little room, low and clear.

"I can't imagine what you both mean, but I know I have nobody in the world except

A MODERN KNIGHT

Uncle,— and I'm dreadfully afraid of him! Did you mean what you wrote in that letter, Mr. Fordyce? Or was it just to make me feel more comfortable about accepting your assistance, in this queer way, that you wrote such — nice things? ”

“ *I meant every word!* ” answered the man, solemnly, holding her gaze with his own, and speaking slowly and distinctly.

“ Then, if you still wish to assume the responsibility, I choose to carry out our plan.”

The sudden blaze of happiness which irradiated the usually unmoved countenance of the Englishman was so noticeable that his friend could only hope that the girl was so pre-occupied that it might escape her observation. It hurt him, that his old chum should wear his heart on his sleeve quite so openly, perhaps only to have it spurned and slighted, in the end, by this slip of a girl who, as yet, had no adequate conception of the value of the treasure which was to be poured out at her shrine.

Fordyce strode forward to where Barbara stood, a tiny figure in floating, white draperies, reaching barely to his shoulder, and tucking her hand snugly beneath his arm, faced his friend, exclaiming,

A MODERN KNIGHT

“ It’s all right, man,— fire away ! ”

The calling in of the necessary witnesses occupied only a moment, and almost before the two people most intimately concerned could comprehend the fact, they had been pronounced man and wife,— a wedding-ring and a wonderful diamond had appeared, as if by enchantment, upon Barbara’s finger,— a heavy circlet with one magnificent solitaire set deep in the gold, rested securely upon the little finger of the groom’s left hand,— the little bride had been kissed by everyone, with the single exception of the groom, and had hurried upstairs, to make a speedy change back into her sombre, black garments,— and Allerton and Fordyce were clasping each other’s hands in a grip which denoted a friendship, tried and true,— of the sort to which most people aspire but never quite attain.

As the waiting taxicab swallowed them up, Allerton’s parting words were,

“ Good-by, and bless you both ! Let me know your plans,— I want to be in at the finish ! ”

As they drove away Fordyce glanced covertly at the tense little figure, sitting bolt upright in its own corner of the cab, and ex-

A MODERN KNIGHT

perienced the desire to take her in his arms and tell her just how adorable she was, but he curbed the impulse, and was on the verge of breaking the tension with some jocular remark anent a "council of war" when Barbara grasped his arm nervously, with,

"Look! In the car! Quickly!"

In the street-car, which had drawn abreast of them, perched upon the very edge of the seat, and looking very much worried and upset, Alton descried Aunt Eva. Evidently, by some freak of a lucky fortune, she had been delayed somewhere, and they both realized how important it was for her charge to be already in the waiting-room when her chaperone should arrive upon the scene. Alton spoke to their driver, who drew sharply away from the car and hurried down a side street, depositing them at the entrance of the station just as the car, containing a very indignant and flurried woman, turned the corner of the block.

"I must talk to you,—it's imperative," hurried Alton as he piloted the girl to a seat in the main waiting-room. "If I engage the drawing-room for Mrs. Alton Fordyce, could you get away from them and occupy it, and meet me after they're abed?"

A MODERN KNIGHT

"I don't see how I could," answered the girl, wistfully, adding, "but it would be nice to be alone, for once."

"You dear child! Now, listen carefully! I'll put the state-room (if I can get it!) in the name of Miss Walton, and when bed-time comes, you just get up and remove into it and shut the door,—and Uncle won't dare make too much fuss over it or it will look precious queer to the other passengers, and he will not risk that! If there is any opposition, just repeat your remark of that first night about 'giving warning.' Yes!" as Barbara looked astonished, "I heard it then! Can you do it, do you think?"

"I'll try,—if you'll be somewhere within sight, to give me courage. The Sisters used to say that I was quite an actress, but I have never had a serious test of my histrionic ability."

"I'll be there! Never fear that I'll desert on the eve of battle! Only remember this,—your uncle has absolutely no control over you, now! Well, I'm off before the avalanche descends!" and, with a final, cheery smile, Fordyce disappeared in the crowd, just as Aunt Eva propelled herself, headlong, through the main doorway into the waiting-room.

CHAPTER EIGHT.



WHEN the warm and thoroughly frightened little woman finally located her charge she hurried over and plumped herself down beside her with a huge sigh of genuine relief.

"*Where* did you disappear to?" she demanded, between gasps for breath.

Barbara, seated primly upright, the picture of patient waiting, beside her little black hand-bag and her fingers crossed listlessly in her lap, looked up with a gleam of malice in her brown eyes, as she replied,

"When I came away from that store I found I had lost myself, and so I thought I had better come back here and wait until you came for me, which I supposed would be by three o'clock, anyway. Where have *you* been, all this time, Aunt Eva?"

Barbara could not have told what put it into her head to ask the question and she was more than amazed at the unexpected result.

A MODERN KNIGHT

"Oh dear!" gasped the little woman, trembling visibly, "Oh dear me! Don't you ever let your uncle know that I let you out alone and lost you for so long! Oh, I don't know what to do! You won't say anything about it, will you, child? Do promise me you won't!"

The imp of mischief which seemed to have taken possession of her hitherto rather moody young companion, puzzled the elder woman, who had no means of knowing that Alton had appeared upon the other side of the row of seats, directly behind her unconscious back, and was making mute signs of encouragement to Barbara.

"But where were you, while I was lost?" persisted the girl, in as stern a tone as she was capable of assuming. "I insist upon knowing!"

"Oh dear me!" sighed the little woman, once more, "I'm afraid I was asleep!"

"Asleep,—when I was wandering about alone! Oh, Aunt Eva!"

"Yes," deprecatingly,— "you see, I went to the ladies' parlor as I said I would, and lay down to get 'forty winks,'—and next I knew it was a quarter past four and I couldn't find a

A MODERN KNIGHT

trace of you anywhere, or anyone who remembered having seen you. But I'm so relieved to find you here before your uncle gets back! He'd just about *kill* me if he knew,— and you'll be a dear girl and help me out, now, won't you? ”

Acutely aware of Alton Fordyce's gleeful face, and quick to see that she had the whip hand of at least one of her tormenting guardians, Barbara drew herself up and said, coolly,

“ I'll say nothing to Uncle,— just so long as you let me do exactly as I please. The first intimation, on your part, of interference in any way with me will be the signal for me to tell all I know! That will eliminate you from this situation, and leave the issue solely between that man and myself. Remember, you are to side with me, if it comes to a choice between us,— or else remain strictly neutral,— a sort of an offensive and defensive alliance,— is it a bargain? ”

“ What do you mean to do? ” parried the horrified woman, anxiously.

“ Here he comes, now! Quickly! Is it a bargain? Yes, or no? ” insisted Barbara, wickedly, entranced with her success as an amateur actress.

A MODERN KNIGHT

"Yes, yes, if I must! But I don't see how —"

"Never you mind, now," returned the girl,— "perhaps, if you decide to join forces with me entirely, I may be able to — yes, Uncle, we had a very successful shopping trip, thank you!"

The tall man came hurrying up to them, his face disfigured by a scowl, and very evidently worried and not in the best of tempers, and as he approached them Barbara caught a glimpse of a smile as her newly made husband effaced himself in the line of waiting tourists at the Pullman reservation window.

Her two guardians conversed in undertones for several minutes and then the man departed to make his own arrangements for the train that night. Barbara turned to her companion, remarking, in a quietly level voice,

"Please go over and tell that man that I wish a berth all to myself."

"Now, Barbara,— " began the poor, harassed little woman, but she caught a look from her charge which impressed her with the wisdom of speedy compliance. She crossed the room and appeared to be disputing with her husband, but came back, shaking her head

A MODERN KNIGHT

sorrowfully, and remarking, ingratiatingly, "He won't allow it, no matter what I say!"

"Very well! I only wanted to feel that I had been perfectly fair and had given him his chance,—but I see it is of no use."

The plump little lady bustled back, and was apparently reporting this astonishing statement to its object, but was impatiently dismissed and came back to her seat wearing a decidedly down-cast expression.

There was still a forty minute wait before train-time, and the two women sat in antagonistic silence until the elder man had retired from the window and passed behind them on his way out of the station, evidently upon some last but important errand. As he passed behind her Barbara started to turn her head to see where he was going but was deterred by a peculiar sensation at the back of her neck,—that of a hand lightly brushed against her coil of hair. Raising an investigating finger, she touched a slip of paper, laid on her shoulder underneath the brim of her hat. Holding it low at her side she discovered it to be a bit torn from the edge of a time-table, holding these words, in a now familiar hand,—

"Uncle seems restless! I'm going to shadow him till train-time,—confusion to cads,—my motto!"

A MODERN KNIGHT

Blushing a little as she recognized the chirography, she crushed the paper and dropped it out of sight between the seats.

"Barbara," ventured her companion at last, "what's come over you? You aren't the same girl at all, somehow!"

"Of course I'm not," assented Barbara, calmly.

"Why is it? You're changed, in some way, — you are so —"

"Of course!" agreed the girl again, "I warned you both that there was a limit and you saw fit to disbelieve me! That limit is reached, — that's all!"

"What did you mean, awhile back, by my joinng forces with you?"

"If you don't *know*," returned the girl, putting a world of meaning into her voice, by way of experiment, "then I'll not tell you!"

"Barbara!" The little woman was excited now, — her china-blue eyes were protruding and her voice had risen to a thin, metallic squeak, — "Tell me, this instant, how much you know and how much is merely guess-work, on your part?"

"Ah!" returned the girl, wisely, with a most disconcerting nodding of her dainty head. "Then there *is* something I ought to know?"

A MODERN KNIGHT

I thought as much! No-o,—on the whole, I think I prefer to play my own game out alone, now,—as I have planned. I had thought of confiding in you,—to a certain extent,—but I have changed my mind, for the present. Only remember,—I'm not nearly so helpless and forlorn as you and Uncle believe me to be — since this afternoon! ”

“ Did you talk to anyone about yourself,—as you tried to do on ship-board? Surely you did not do anything so foolish? ” inquired the elder woman, with a tone which implied that she was hoping for a favorable answer, although hardly expecting it.

Barbara merely smiled her inscrutable smile, and looked at her so wickedly that her aunt was thrown into a state of nervous excitement which lasted until train-time, when Barbara added to her fright by the remark,

“ Don't forget that not one word of this conversation is to be reported! ”

.

Just as their train was called the lanky individual reappeared, carrying some letters which he hastily thrust into his coat pocket as he grasped their bags and started for the platform.

A MODERN KNIGHT

Barbara looked quickly around in a vain endeavor to locate Fordyce, and her heart sank with the quick fear that he might miss the train which was already pulling into the station. She failed to find him anywhere in sight, but it was not until the train had actually started that she gave up hope of seeing him,—and until then she had not fully realized how much she had depended upon his very presence to spur her courage on to the playing of her prescribed part. Her whole afternoon's experience seemed like a dream to her, except when she could take a peep at the two golden circlets, hidden safely in her purse, which she had taken the precaution to remove from her finger while dressing, after the ceremony, and when she felt, through her frock, the locket which she had purchased, during her hurried trip to Dr. Allerton's house.

As she stood up to remove her jacket an unusually obsequious porter hurried forward to relieve her of the wrap, and at the same time slipped a tiny folded note into her hand. Her spirits rose with a bound,—so he was on board, after all, and she would probably see him before very long!

"I'm going to wash my hands, Aunt Eva," she said to the little lady, and forestalled the

A MODERN KNIGHT

other's evident intention of accompanying her by a stern, "You need not come,—remember!"

Under the impression that, if one must fracture the truth, at intervals, it was always best to be strictly honest when possible, she solemnly washed both face and hands before glancing at the tiny note which read,

Dear,

Eureka! Better success than I dared to hope! Can't occupy my own section, which is opposite where you are sitting until I can efface the satisfied grin from my countenance. I'd be too noticeable until my glee wears off a bit! The state-room at the farther end is yours,—porter will come for your things whenever Uncle starts his party bedwards. Will you come to me, on the observation platform, afterwards? Must see you alone,—it is frightfully important! You are the bravest little thing I ever knew, and I am proud to sign myself

Yours — A. F.

As Barbara had no writing materials she summoned the porter, and standing in plain view, but out of earshot, at the end of the aisle, she said impressively,

A MODERN KNIGHT

"Tell my husband I cannot write, but I'll meet him in the observation-car at any time he sets. You can let me know, can you not?"

At her unconscious emphasis of the phrase "my husband" the darkey rolled his eyes and looked somewhat nonplussed, but departed, with a broad grin. Some moments after she had taken her seat he hastened back through the car again, and bending to speak over her shoulder, he said, audibly, "Ten o'clock, lady!"

Aunt Eva was perfectly aware of this bit of by-play, and could hardly have failed to hear the ambiguous words, but she evidently deemed discretion the better part of valor, under the circumstances, and contented herself with opening her mouth as if to speak and then closing it again with a snap.

Up to the time of their return from the dining-car, Alton had remained absolutely invisible. It is true that, on her way to the diner, in passing from car to car, a hand had clasped Barbara's in the dimness, and as soon as she had returned its pressure, in a faint degree, it had drawn back into the obscurity of the dark vestibule, where a darker spot in the general blackness indicated the whereabouts of a stalwart masculine figure. She had become accus-

A MODERN KNIGHT

tomed to the idea that she was probably not to see him until much later in the evening, so it was with genuine surprise that she discovered, on their return to their section, after dinner, the big Englishman, comfortably ensconced in his own seat and deep in the perusal of a current magazine. So absorbed was he that he did not even glance up as his neighbors took their seats, and as the man and woman settled themselves to a game of cribbage the girl gave a long sigh of real relief, and abandoned herself to the uninterrupted contemplation of the man opposite her.

He certainly was good to look at,— a husky, broad-shouldered specimen of British manhood. She liked the way the thick, brown hair followed the lines of his splendid head,— she liked the little crinkles around his eyes and at the corners of his large, well-formed mouth, which came and went as he seemed to arrive at some amusing spot in his article,— she especially admired the absolutely clean, well-groomed look which is so much an integral part of the healthy, out-doors-loving young Briton,— a look as if mind and heart were both “swept and garnished” to the same degree of perfection as the exterior. She sat for the better part of an

A MODERN KNIGHT

hour, her mind making little side digressions, but with a sort of inner consciousness directed toward the doings of her neighbor, until it was suddenly borne in upon her that she had not seen him turn one page in all the time since she had begun her observations. On a closer inspection she encountered a pair of mirthful gray eyes regarding her quizzically over the upper edge of the periodical, and she comprehended at once that the investigation had not been by any means one-sided. As their eyes met the humorous light in his was suddenly quenched and their expression softened until she could not support their gaze without embarrassment. She felt as if she were being encircled by warm arms, and her cheeks glowed until she turned away to hide her confusion, under the pretense of looking at her uncle's watch.

CHAPTER NINE.

“ELL,” growled the man, glancing a second time at his time-piece, “after nine. Time we were turning in, I guess,” and he beckoned to the porter who was hovering in the background.

He hastily prepared the Walton's section and then Fordyce's,—then with one quick motion possessed himself of Barbara's things,—bag, coat and umbrella and retreated hastily out of sight into her stateroom.

“Good-night,” said the girl, sweetly, as she rose and started to follow the porter, who had deposited her impedimenta and had now come back to the end of the little hallway, to ascertain if she was following him.

“*Barbara!*” The command came from the man, and she halted with her hand on the edge of the made-up section wherein Alton had disappeared, and where he now sat, cross-legged, convulsed with silent laughter, as he listened to

A MODERN KNIGHT

the spirited controversy taking place on the outside of the drawn curtain.

"Where are you going? What does this mean?" came in quick interrogation from the man, followed by "Oh dear! Oh dear!" *sotto voce* from the little woman.

"It means that I warned you before that I should act for myself,—and I have. It means that I am going to the stateroom which is reserved for me. Good-night!" and turning on her heel she swept out of sight around the corner of the narrow passage way.

The deserted couple stood and gazed stupidly at each other for a full minute,—then the man found his voice and said to his companion,

"It's ridiculous! Of course the stateroom isn't hers! What could have put that into her head? I'll find the conductor!" and he bustled off, to return in a moment, followed by the Pullman conductor and the widely-grinning porter.

"There's certainly no mistake, sir," repeated the conductor, patiently and earnestly, showing his lists in verification. "That stateroom was engaged at five o'clock to-day, sir, for a Miss Barbara Walton,—and here are the check and the ticket, sir, all O. K. Good-night, sir!"

A MODERN KNIGHT

The man turned to glare at his companion, who promptly retired behind her berth curtains, and Alton heard him mutter, disgustedly,

“ Well,— I don’t yet see how this was managed,— but if she thinks she will leave the train, or any such foolishness, she will be checkmated! She will not leave that room if I have to spend the whole night on a camp-stool, outside her door,— and I’ll do it, too! ”

Alton’s momentary glee being transmuted into something quite different by this remark, he left his berth, where he had been huddled, fully dressed, and repaired to his favorite place of meditation,— the observation platform,— to puzzle over the means of now consulting with Barbara, later in the evening, in the light of this last development. Had he delayed his departure from the car for only a few moments he would have been spared much unnecessary anxiety, for he would have heard the somewhat noisy return of his neighbor, fretting and grumbling because both porter and conductor had refused to permit him and his camp-stool to blockade the aisle.

Fordyce was soon puffing away at his pet pipe and dreaming with his eyes wide open. Indeed, he did not need to close them to con-

A MODERN KNIGHT

jure up the face and form of the girl whom he had so hastily espoused,—her large eyes haunted him, and he felt that if she did not, in time, come to care for him in the way in which (he was forced to admit to himself!) he honestly hoped she might,—then he would be the most miserable man alive. He was honest enough to himself to acknowledge that he was experiencing that thing which, all his life, he had most unmercifully ridiculed,—and viewed with something akin to disgust. He called to mind that he had never had the least patience with what is commonly called “love at first sight,” his argument being that real love could only grow and blossom and come to its full perfection on a foundation whose solidity precluded the possibility of a first-sight passion. This precipitate type of love, he had always felt, could only be the result of a mere physical attractiveness in the object of the suddenly inspired passion, and was bound to wear itself out with the attainment of its desires. As a matter of course, such a feeling must be, primarily, a selfish one, and only concerned with gratifying its own pleasures.

.

A MODERN KNIGHT

Yet, here he was,—married to a girl whom he had known less than thirty-six hours, and falling more deeply in love, every moment! His position was certainly unique,—no past acquaintance,—no courtship,—merely a question or two, asked and answered,—a few words spoken over them by an old friend whom he had almost forgotten until the need of him brought him into his mind, once more,—and now, he was certainly and surely a married man,—but a husband, without a wife,—and in the tragically embarrassing position of finding himself head over heels in love with a child whom he must treat simply as he might a dear and cherished sister, for an indefinite time! Really, it was a disconcerting *impasse* for Alton Fordyce to have plunged himself into, and he wondered at himself, until before his mental vision swam a picture of the girl and her pathetic eyes, and then he admitted that it was the natural course of events.

He began building the most flagrant air-castles,—passing lightly and impatiently over his future settlement with these impostors and their impossible son, to the time when he might have established his bride in a home of their own, somewhere. He knew that from now, on,

A MODERN KNIGHT

he must tread warily,— she must not be hurried or alarmed in any way,— he could enjoy her nearness and dearness,— her sweet companionship,— her gay little humors,— he could be an efficient “ shield and buckler ” to turn the points of any hostile darts,— he could see her each day,— greet her each morning,— bid her good-night, each evening,— perhaps he might even kiss her, at long intervals,— all these things he might do,— just so long as he was able to banish from his eyes and voice anything warmer than brotherly affection!

“ Beg pahdon, suh! ” said a voice at his elbow,” but yo’ wife done ax me to give yo’ dis, suh! ”

The darkey porter displayed an alarming expanse of white tooth surface as he presented a folded slip of paper. Hastily striking a wax vesta the Englishman scanned the bit of paper,— then fell into a reverie. The scrap bore only these words,

“ Uncle has made me give my word not to leave this room until morning, so would you be very much shocked if I ask you to come to me, here? You said you must see me, and I see no other way,— do you? ”

A MODERN KNIGHT

There was no beginning and no signature, but a whimsical smile curved the corners of the man's mouth as he thought, "Would I be shocked? My own wife, too,— as far as the Church and State can make her! Oh, it is rich! I only wonder that she didn't sign herself 'Barbara Walton!' She seems to overlook the mere fact that she is married!"

"Any answer, suh?" questioned the ebony Mercury, after an appreciable wait.

"No — I'll answer it later," said Fordyce, passing something to the man's conveniently waiting palm, and the gentleman of color was forced to retire, albeit with curiosity written large upon his dusky countenance. He would have liked to know more of the doings of this queer couple who carried on their intercourse through scraps of paper with himself as the medium, and yet who mentioned each other so proudly to him as "my husband" and "my wife."

When Fordyce was certain that the curious porter was out of the way he pulled himself together and went in to tap lightly on the door of Stateroom A.

A MODERN KNIGHT

"Come," called Barbara's voice, softly.

The man turned the handle of the door and entered, closing it gently behind him and standing stiffly before it.

"I got your note," he murmured, and then mentally upbraided himself for such a palpable inanity,—as though he would have been there, otherwise.

"Then you weren't shocked?" she inquired, naïvely.

"Rather not! Shocked, because my own wife sends for me to come to her room? Only, I'll be perfectly honest with you,—I do feel a bit awkward! Under any other circumstances, I think I should know how to treat my bride,—but, you see, I don't know exactly how you wish me to behave toward you when we are alone together. Whether you wish to be treated as a friend, or whether I may do my best to make you care for me?"

Barbara surveyed him an instant with startled eyes but she did not smile.

"I hadn't even thought about that," she replied with an assumption of dignity which the man before her would not have believed possible in one of her immature years. "I know you are very much of a gentleman!"

A MODERN KNIGHT

"Also — a man,— and your husband," added Fordyce, under his breath,— then aloud, "I think you can trust me not to take any undue liberties, although being a husband does usually entitle one to *some* privileges,— doesn't it? I have a lot to talk to you about, and I really think you would be more comfortable out on the platform. There is one way of escape which you overlooked! You gave your word not to leave this room until morning,— and in ten minutes it will *be* morning, literally speaking, as it is now eight minutes of twelve. You can come out then without breaking the letter of the law, even if the spirit of it is a little strained!"

Barbara's eyes danced with appreciation, although her red lips remained sober.

"That is so,— I had not thought of that! But I don't think I would feel quite right about it, having given my word of honor. So I think you will have to make yourself as comfortable as possible here, and tell me all about things,— ever since you left the station with Uncle."

"Don't you *dare* call him 'Uncle' again!" exploded Alton, vehemently.

"Why?" asked the girl, in a frightened voice. "Tell me what you mean?"

A MODERN KNIGHT

“ Because he isn’t your uncle,— or any relation to you, I believe,— because he’s an impostor and a cheat,— and his elaborately constructed house of cards is just about to be tumbled about his ears! He called at the General Delivery window, this afternoon, for his letters, addressed to Thomas Dixon! ”

In the excitement of his revelation Alton had leaned farther over toward the girl than he intended, and dropped his hand protectingly over one of hers which rested on the seat between them, but he was instantly sobered by the realization that she had shrunk from his unthinking and entirely unintentional caress.

“ I beg your pardon,” he exclaimed, stiffly, as he withdrew the offending hand, “ I did not know that you felt so strongly about it,— and I did not mean — ”

“ Oh, it’s not that! Really it isn’t! ” began the girl, tremulously, while her eyes filled and she caught her breath pathetically. “ It’s only that, somehow,— I can’t realize that I’m married to you! You are the first man I’ve ever really known, you know,— and I’ve been so nervous and keyed-up,— and — oh! please forgive me! ”

A MODERN KNIGHT

She smiled through her tears and held out both hands in a pretty supplicating gesture which warmed the man's heart.

He appreciated what a tremendous nervous strain she had been enduring all day,— also how very small and frail she was,— and he gently but firmly captured both little fluttering hands. Almost before she could think of a protest she found herself weeping into a broad, gray tweed shoulder,— a strong arm was holding her close, and little fond, comforting words, such as one would use to soothe a child's troubles, were being whispered somewhere into her mass of dark hair. After a few moments the convulsive sobbing ceased, and as she grew quieter Alton whispered, banteringlly,

“Cheer up, dear! Was the trousseau so very dreadful, after all?”

“Oh, awful!” gasped Barbara, mentally blessing him for the diversion. “You can't imagine how —”

“Never mind! We'll buy another, before long,— and that one shall be a beauty, I promise you! And what did you buy with my contribution? Something nice, I hope?”

Barbara blushed and seemed to find difficulty in speaking, but finally managed to stam-

A MODERN KNIGHT

mer out, "I'd really rather not tell you — now! You see, I don't know you very well,— some time I will,— later,— if you wish,— but please, not now!"

"Just one question, at least," persisted the man, gravely,— "You didn't put it into this ring for me, did you?"

Barbara laid one finger upon the jewel in question and answered, with a far-away look in her dreamy eyes, "Oh, no, that was my own to give. It was my Father's, and I know he would be glad for the Prince to have it!"

Alton's arm instinctively tightened about the slender figure which he still partly held,— then he released her entirely, saying soberly,

"You whimsical childie! Please don't begin by exalting a very faulty mortal into a prince, even in your imagination! I assure you I am most dreadfully human and commonplace, and sometimes I almost fear for your happiness."

But Barbara only shook her head in a decided negative, although to which part of his remark that emphatic negation was meant to apply, Alton could not determine. At last, when her tears had altogether ceased to fall, he spoke laughingly to her.

A MODERN KNIGHT

“Come, little wife,—now we must have a grand pow-wow,—and decide what is to be done, and then I must let you rest a bit, for we arrive rather early, and Cousin John is (metaphorically speaking) ‘waiting at the church’ you know!”

“Oh, Mr. Fordyce,” murmured Barbara, brokenly, “you have been so good to me,—I can’t begin to thank you and to tell you how ashamed I am to have broken down like this.”

“That’s all right,” cheerily responded her husband, “now we must plan!” and he rapidly outlined to her the scheme which had been maturing in his mind all the afternoon and evening.

Barbara was to appear to acquiesce in the plans of her bogus relatives concerning her future until the latest available moment, delaying the supposed wedding-day as long as possible, in order to give Alton time to muster the forces of the law to their support,—then he would act, suddenly and effectively, and have all the plotters encompassed in the net at once. After that, he would install Barbara in a home of her own, somewhere away from scenes which would only recall sad memories, which, in the mean time he would have all prepared for her,—and then —

A MODERN KNIGHT

he paused, not knowing how to express, in adequate words, the ideas which flung themselves to the fore in his brain, and remembering, just in the nick of time, that he was dealing with a shy and easily-frightened child, rather than a mature woman.

As he rose to take his leave he discovered himself to be still in possession of Barbara's hand, and he caught himself wondering if she was conscious of how madly his heart was pounding,—and whether the thrill which was pervading his whole being at that contact could be communicated to her by way of his finger-tips.

"But, Mr. Fordyce," she was saying, "why didn't you just tell me all this, before,—I could have gone back to the convent, then you need not have married me—it seems too bad—for you."

To the man's listening heart it seemed that there was a short though very perceptible pause before the words "for you," and the blood went racing through his veins as he drew her a little closer by the imprisoned hand.

"For just this once,—the forbidden subject," he answered, in rather a hushed voice,—
"first, you *are* married to me, so it is perfectly ridiculous for you to call me Mr. Fordyce! Now say Alton."

A MODERN KNIGHT

"Alton," repeated the girl meekly, with her eyes fixed on his face.

"Now, say it once more,— I rather like to hear you say it!"

She did as he bade her, smiling a little at his inherent boyishness.

"Good! You see when I hesitated at that part of our future plans concerning our home, it was only because it was on the tip of my tongue to forget our peculiar relations and tell you a little of what is in my heart,— but I feared you would rather not have me,— a little of something which concerns me too vitally to have you even minded to smile at it! Have I your permission to go on?"

"What is it?" she asked, with the same startled look of appeal in her eyes which he had seen there on the night of their meeting.

"Only this, Barbara dear,— and please don't look so frightened,— it hurts me! I have never believed in love at first sight, as it is called, and have always guded those who seemed to take so much stock in it,— but now, I give in! I had no idea that I really cared for you in that way until the facts proved that I need not marry you unless I wished,— that there was another way out of it for you,— and then it was

A MODERN KNIGHT

brought home to me with a rush. I knew you were sweet and refined and attractive, and that, for some unaccountable reason, I felt impelled to help you,— but I know why, now! Because my own lonely heart went out to you and claimed you as my very own,— because I love you, truly and strongly,— because I hope, some day, you will be able to truthfully tell me the same thing,— and then — Girl, Girl, you are too young to realize the full and wonderful significance, but it will mean the most consummate happiness which earth can hold for two people! Now I must go, little wife, or else I might lose my head and forget that, as yet, I have a wife only in name, not in heart! I didn't even claim the groom's privilege of 'kissing the bride' this afternoon, you noticed, for fear you would not like to have me, under the circumstances! Good-night, dear," and he lifted the little hand lightly to his lips a moment and turned to the door.

"Wait, please," called Barbara, faintly.

Alton turned with his hand upon the latch, and waited, questioning her with eyes and attitude, for her to relieve her mind of its apparent burden.

A MODERN KNIGHT

"Would — would you — like to — do it now?" finished the girl, while her face burned with her effort, and she trembled slightly.

One step carried the man back to her side, where he tilted up the flower-like face and gazed long and earnestly into the clear depths of the eyes raised so trustingly to his own as if he were striving to pierce behind the veil and read the motive back of her curious request. At last he approached his face, very slowly,— experimentally, as it were, to hers, and seeing the involuntary contraction of her muscles and the unconscious closing of her eyes for a fleeting second, he straightened up and shook his head, saying,

"Thank you, Girlie. I'd better not! You see, yourself, you don't really wish it. I don't want your sense of duty to run away with you, and believe me, I shall not expect you to kiss me until you can do it without shutting your eyes to me! And *please* don't try so hard to like me, for it is almost sure to spoil it all. If you should want me for anything, I'll be staying at the 'Sunset House,' and a word will bring me to you at any time! In the morning I shall be off to Laredo, on the trail of one Mr. Thomas Dixon!"

A MODERN KNIGHT

“ Pleasant dreams, little girl, and we’ll out-wit them yet,— see if we don’t ! ” and with a boyish grin, Alton vanished from the stateroom.

CHAPTER TEN.



ALTON Fordyce was thoroughly tired, — “knocked up,” as he would have expressed it,— and more than a little worried, into the bargain. Here it was, lacking only one day of being a week since he had arrived in Butte, and he had seen or heard absolutely nothing of Barbara. He had made a flying trip down to Laredo, and after much inconvenience and abundance of red tape, he had succeeded in obtaining a back number of the “Morning Star” which had a printed copy of George Walton’s last will and testament, over three months before. The only paragraph which he felt could at all concern this affair in which he was involved seemed to be the following —

“All that part of my property situated near Laredo, which has been named for my daughter; consisting of the ‘2BarA’ ranch and all it comprises, as well as the two mines owned by me, which will be found registered

A MODERN KNIGHT

under the same name, together with the old homestead on Rowan Street, in which she was born, and the sum of \$20,000 in cash, now on deposit in the banks named in the appended list, I give and bequeath to my only daughter,—to be held in trust for her until she comes of age by my old-time partner and friend, Thomas Dixon; all accounts to be submitted quarterly, to the firm of Andrews & Brown, Attorneys; except in the case of Barbara's marrying, in which event the control of all her financial affairs will be assumed by her husband until she is of legal age to assume the responsibility: namely, twenty-one years."

"At last! Thomas Dixon drops into his proper place in the landscape, for which I am devoutly thankful!" muttered the investigator, carefully cutting out the article and pocketing it,—and he had then ridden thirty miles out into the plains to have a talk with the foreman of the 2BarA ranch.

He had found that worthy to be a grizzled veteran of a cow-boy,—weather-tanned to the color of mahogany, and muscled like a prize-fighter. In the half hour of his call he dis-

A MODERN KNIGHT

covered the man to be a whole-souled devotee of the late owner and of all persons and things pertaining to him, and just as heartily detesting Mr. Dixon. He told Alton that Dixon was not and had never been a partner in the 2BarA outfit, or the two mines of the same name, which Mr. Walton always considered the finest of all the property in his possession,—and when Fordyce told him the story of the last few days, including his own summary marriage, and his subsequent discoveries in Salt Lake City, the old fellow's excitement knew no bounds. He exercised a large and very picturesque vocabulary upon the duplicity of the old rascal and his son, and ended with,—

“Now — if there's goin' to be any trouble over this affair, an' you an' Miss Barbara wants a place to make a safe get-away to,—this ranch is IT. They won't never dare follow out here, 'cause I told the old man I'd let a little daylight plumb through that ornery carcass of his if he ever set foot out here agin,—an' he knows d——d well I'd do it, too! Miss Barbara —(pardon, Stranger, I forget the child's gone an' got married!)—would be as safe here as anywheres. Why'nt ye bring her out here, right away? She'd be happy,—an'

A MODERN KNIGHT

what better place could ye have fer a honeymoon,— now, tell *me?* ” and he dug his listener meaningly in the ribs with a huge forefinger.

The man's pleasantries made Alton supremely uncomfortable, and he finally felt it incumbent upon him to enlighten the old cow-puncher a bit as to his domestic relations, and the old man listened with an expression of the most supreme scorn upon his bronzed and weather-beaten countenance.

“ Hell! ” he ejaculated, expectorating violently,— “ a marriage of convenience, eh? So you think George Walton's daughter would've married ye under any conditions if she hadn't liked ye an' respected ye, a hull lot? By Crimus! I know her better'n that! You're plumb locoed, if ye believe any such nonsense! You bring her out here where she loves every rod o'ground and every room in the old house, an' where she won't have anythin' to trouble her mind, an' I tell ye it won't take her long to find out that she *does* care,— more'n she knows, now! The big house has been closed fer nigh onto a year, now, an' we'd all like to see it open again,— an' the rightful owner livin' here, once more. Take my advice and find out her *real* feelin's! ”

A MODERN KNIGHT

“ But,” protested Fordyce, “ she’s so young, — she doesn’t know what love is,— ”

“ Huh! ” grunted the plainsman, under his breath, shifting his pipe rapidly to the other corner of his capacious mouth and back again,— “ Look’y here, young feller! I like ye, a hull lot,— I make free to say that ye’re the kind of a man that George Walton would’ve liked,— but ye’re an all-fired simpleton in some things! That’s the reason I’m goin’ to butt into yer affairs,— though it’s plumb agin what principles I’ve got left. (An’ last time I butted into someone else’s affairs, I got a bullet in my hide, too!) Your wife’s no younger than her mother was when she was married! When George Walton was twenty-one, he made a run-away match (a love match, mind ye!) with a girl who was just turned eighteen, who didn’t have a cent to her name,— I helped ’em over the border into the next county, myself,— an’ in all these years, to my certain knowledge, that couple were never separated more than twenty-four hours, an’ they never had a single scrap, neither! Do you think the daughter of two people such as they were isn’t going to know what love is? I tell ye she ought to be the tender passion personified,— only she ain’t woke

A MODERN KNIGHT

up to it yet! You bring her out here to us,—that's all I got to say!"

"But her training!" protested Alton. "A girl brought up by an outfit of nuns, in a French convent, isn't as old at eighteen as an ordinary girl at sixteen,—and you can hardly expect heredity to play much part in her character,—at least, not yet awhile."

"Shucks!" burst out the cow-man, disgustedly, and Fordyce smiled in spite of himself to hear that mild expletive on the lips which had so recently evinced an intimate acquaintance with the most violent language, in connection with Mr. Dixon. "Bring that girl out here, an' give me ten minutes confab with her,—an' I reckon you'll be satisfied with the result. She used to be a chip of the old block,—an' I know what I'm talkin' about. All I've got to say to ye is to bring her out here an' trust to the future! So long! Glad to see ye any time,—so long!"

.

Alton had come back at the end of the week with his mind made up to act upon the old ranchman's advice, and as he sat in his room at the hotel that afternoon, he was wondering how he could see Barbara to put his theory to

A MODERN KNIGHT

the test, and why he had received no word from her. Surely she must be all right, or she would have managed to let him know, in some way! Twice he wrote her a hasty note, and twice he destroyed the result of his efforts, without even a second reading. He was building a dream world, these days, and he was becoming immeasurably anxious to put the cow-man suggestion into operation.

At last, about seven o'clock that evening, his suspense was cut short but his curiosity and his fears aroused by the short note tucked into his mail-box during the dinner hour. It read,—

“I can't stand the pressure any longer,—am coming to you tonight, and you will have to take me away from here,—I don't care where! These people are all hateful and horrid, and if I have to stay here much longer I shall be tempted to do something desperate, and let them know that I am aware of their imposture! That's all! It is hard on you, I know, when you are doing so much for me, but I can't see any other way out. Expect me about ten o'clock,—or as soon after that as I can get away without being noticed.

B. W. F.”

A MODERN KNIGHT

It made Alton's heart throb joyfully to see how unconsciously she signed the "F" to her name, indicating that at least she was becoming enough accustomed to the idea of their marriage to have accepted the use of his name, even in her correspondence with himself, and he hummed a snatch of a popular tune as he hurried down to the desk to try and make affairs look as regular as possible to the hotel management.

"My wife will arrive here some time this evening," he announced, to the astonishment of the desk clerk, and the very evident discomfiture of a couple of gaily dressed and painted damsels who were endeavoring to attract his attention. "Have you a comfortable room with bath which she can have for a few days?"

"I'm sorry, sir,—the only vacant rooms in the house at present are the little one which opens into your suite through the bathroom, and one two floors higher up, sir."

"The former will do,—I'll take it and give her the large one,—number twenty, you said? Thank you."

"Coming in on the Western Flyer, sir,—or the Pacific Express?" the clerk inquired civilly.

A MODERN KNIGHT

"Hm-m-m! She says to expect her — soon after ten," replied Fordyce, producing the note and innocently pretending to consult it. "She says it might be even later than that!"

"That's the Western Flyer, then, of course," decided the clerk genially. "It's usually from fifteen to fifty minutes behind its time! Yes, sir,— we'll show her up at once,— good-night, sir!"

Fordyce thought best not to correct the clerk's obvious mistake about the method of Barbara's arrival, and retired to his rooms to spend the intervening two hours before his wife's coming in collecting his things and transferring them to the tiny box of a room which communicated with the dressing-room on the other side,— and in despatching a bell-boy with a good sized bill to procure what flowers he could at that late hour. When the boy returned with the result of his efforts Alton sat down and gave way to a fit of uncontrollable laughter.

"The stores was all shut, boss," reported that enterprising youth, "but I knowed a man what had charge of a beauty garding, an' I went and give de guy de money if he'd let me pick a box full of de t'ings. He said dey

A MODERN KNIGHT

wouldn't be missed an' it was good fer de plants, — so I jest sort o' sampled everyt'ing dey was."

"*I should judge so!*" gurgled Alton, between gasps for breath,— "now you'll have to get about a dozen glasses to hold this horticultural display. Hurry up!"

On the boy's return they both fell to work sorting and arranging the blossoms in the glasses which he had secured. Into one glass went white roses and heliotrope, into another bright scarlet geraniums,— and it was not until Alton disentangled two wonderful lavender orchids from their conglomerate surroundings that he turned sternly to the boy.

"*Those* never grew out-of-doors in any garden, in this climate! Where did you get these things, my boy? Certainly not in a garden!"

"'Twas,— a beauty garding!" stoutly insisted the lad. "Leastways, it's a kind of a garding,— only all under a glass roof, an' the beds all growin' up on stilts, in boxes, like! The head man's a friend of me pop's, an' when I tells him w'y I has to have 'em, he says I kin! It's at that big place what those new Walton folks has just bought, up on Cedar Street, sir,— an' Gee-e! it sure is a wonder!"

A MODERN KNIGHT

When the boy finally left the room, Alton sat weakly down and took a mental survey of the situation. It certainly was a unique one. Flowers from her fake uncle's greenhouse to greet her on her arrival in this hotel, in her flight from the aforesaid uncle and his doings! It surely was an amusing coincidence, and he hoped it would mitigate her feeling of strangeness at coming to him there. He made a careful selection,—rejecting some which bore mute testimony to the boy's thoroughness of observation rather than his powers of discrimination, such as a couple of huge sunflowers, and three ungainly stalks of gladioli,—and when the remainder of the assortment was arranged he was more than satisfied with the result. The bunch of white roses and heliotrope reposed before the mirror on the dresser, unconsciously duplicating themselves and their own loveliness in its polished surface; the tumbler containing the orchids and a few sprays of feathery green graced the little lamp-table at the bed's head, and other blossoms decorated mantelpiece, center-table and the diminutive writing desk. Even the white-tiled dressing room boasted four deep-red roses ensconced in the tooth-brush holder. Before Alton knew how quickly the

A MODERN KNIGHT

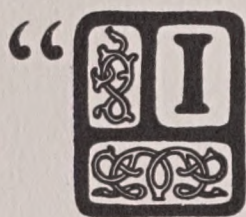
time had flown there was a peremptory knock on the door and the boy of the flowers announced, pompously,

"Here's yer Mrs. Fordyce, sir!" and closed the door emphatically behind her as she timidly entered the room.

She was still in her sombre, black garments, and as Fordyce advanced hastily from the other room she threw back her veil and displayed such a pale, careworn countenance that the man before her uttered one quick exclamation which sounded suspiciously like "Darling!" and picking her up in his arms, he unceremoniously deposited her in the one big chair which the room afforded and tucked a pillow from the bed snugly behind her back. With gentle touch he removed wrap and hat and carried them to the wardrobe,—then went down on one knee to draw off the overshoes which the inclement weather had necessitated. His composure had partly returned by this time, and still upon one knee, he allowed himself to press his lips softly to her palm.

"Welcome, dear," he said, seriously, "I was hungry for a sight of you,—and here you are! Tell me all about what is bothering you." And he drew up a chair facing her, and waited.

CHAPTER ELEVEN.



JUST couldn't stand it a moment longer!" mourned Barbara, plaintively "They are hateful and horrid and disgusting,—and I'd like to kill their son!"

Alton's level brows contracted. "What has he done? Tell me at once, Barbara,—remember I have the right to know, now!"

"It began when we first came," she continued softly. "We met him at the station and he has never forgiven me for not letting him embrace me right there in public! Since then we have had to go hunting for a house, and buying draperies and furniture and china, and all such things,—and he has been all right and at least a gentleman, when his mother has been about with us,—but when we are alone he is entirely different. His eyes have such a horrid gleam and he is always wanting to hold my hand, or some such thing! And he is always teasing me about what he is pleased to call my

A MODERN KNIGHT

prudishness, and saying that he will make me sorry for my treatment of him, some day soon! Oh, he is just too dreadful!"

"Is that *all*?" demanded the Englishman, while his face darkened and was disfigured by an ugly scowl.

Barbara was silent,—visibly embarrassed.

"I must know! Can't you trust me, dear Girl?" The man's voice was pleading.

"Of course,—but it is so hard to get started! If—if you were to look the other way I think I could tell you more easily!"

Alton rose and walked to the window, without a word,—then, "Go on!" he commanded, and she gave him a timid look,—and obeyed.

"You see, this afternoon," she began, meekly, "his mother and he and I went to see the house he has been preparing for me. I kept her with me until we went upstairs, when she managed to leave me alone with him. Really I am rather afraid of him, but I didn't want to say anything, because I did so want to be brave, as you once said I was,—you remember? Well, when we had looked at everything, he wanted me to sit down in the upstairs sitting-room for a while and talk things over,—but I wouldn't, and he didn't like it! Then he

A MODERN KNIGHT

began sort of making love to me,—and of course I wouldn't stand that,—and I started for the stairs. It was very dark in the hall, and he caught me and tried to kiss me! I pushed and struggled as best I could, and I am sure I scratched him at least once! (Here she gave a whimsical little smile of satisfaction!) But you know he is rather a large man,—and he seemed very determined. Finally he held both my arms down and kissed me,—oh, ever so many times,—on my eyes and mouth,—and then his mother called up to know what the disturbance was all about! He said a bad word, then, and let me go, pretty quickly, and when I got down to her I was a baby, and cried, and told her I hated John,—and never *had* been kissed and loathed *being* kissed, as he had done it,—and she reprimanded him quite severely. Do you know,—she really seems to be fond of me, in her own queer way,—dreadfully fond? Then she asked him what he meant by kissing me in that passionate manner and frightening me so? He laughed and said he would like to know how I could expect to be kissed any other way,—being a deucedly attractive girl! His mother laughed at me, then, and only comforted me with the remark, “What else can you expect,

A MODERN KNIGHT

child? Men are all just alike, as far as a pretty girl is concerned!" And so, I came back,—and sent that note,—and tried to rest,—but I couldn't sleep,—I felt as if I couldn't wash my face enough to efface the contact of his lips,—and I don't think I shall ever feel quite clean, again,—nor forget those kisses!"

Barbara buried her face in her hands with a shuddering breath as she finished. There was a long pause in which the man's hands clenched and unclenched many times, while he swallowed once or twice with perceptible effort,—then in a well controlled voice he asked,

"May I come back, now, Barbara?"

"Yes," she acquiesced, wonderingly.

"Listen, dear," he spoke softly, as he stood quietly at her side. "You say you like me a little,—you trust me much,—that I already know,—may I prove to you that there is more than one kind of kiss? That men are *not* all alike in that respect? Then perhaps you will be able to dismiss the thought of your recent humiliation from your mind,—and I would like you to think better of men, as a class, than you do now! May I?"

"You mean —"

A MODERN KNIGHT

“I mean this, in plain words, dear Girl. I wish to have you realize that all men are not so uncontrolled,—that we are not all slaves to our passions and desires. You know that I love you,—love you with all the strength of my nature,—you know that I consider you entirely desirable and most alluring,—also you can’t fail to see that you are absolutely in my power,—much more so than you were in that cad’s, this afternoon! Are you afraid to let me prove my point?”

The girl shook her head slightly and rose to meet him as he bent over the uplifted face with its wide eyes and soft, childish mouth.

It spoke well for the strength of Alton’s character; for the purity of his motive; for his will-power and self-control, that he could draw her to him so tenderly and gently,—and surely no old-time courtier ever saluted the fingers of his queen more reverently than the big man laid his lips upon the trembling ones of the girl in his arms. After softly brushing eyes and forehead with his lips he placed her back in her chair with the remark,

“Now, your eyes and lips belong to me, little girl,—and it is my wish that you banish their previous visitor from your mind,

A MODERN KNIGHT

entirely,—but please don't forget these last few moments! ”

“ There's no danger of that! ” breathed the girl, softly.

The long and intimate silence which ensued was broken by Alton's asking, “ What do you propose doing, now you are here? ”

Barbara started and looked rather embarrassed.

“ I hadn't even thought, except to come to you and have you tell me what to do next,” she replied, meekly.

“ Just as soon as I got your note, I engaged a room and bath for my wife, whom the obsequious desk-clerk promptly surmised was coming in on the ten-something train. It was his own supposition, so I thought it wiser not to correct him,—and don't forget you arrived that way, if anyone should mention it! There was no room to be had except one two floors up, or this one, which connects with mine through the bathroom. It was the best I could do at such short notice, and—well, it will look better to the uninitiated than the other one, don't you think so? I hope you don't mind, dear? ”

But Barbara was gazing about the room with a peculiarly puzzled look on her expressive

A MODERN KNIGHT

countenance, and it was evident that she hardly sensed what he was saying.

"Alton," she blushed as she spoke the unfamiliar name,— "where did you get those lovely orchids? Uncle was boasting, only yesterday, that his new hot-house contained the only specimens within a hundred miles of this spot!"

"Those came from *Uncle's* greenhouse!" exploded Alton, and then, amid heart-healing laughter he told her the story of her "horticultural display," as he still insisted upon calling it.

The girl's self-possession had returned to her during their joint hilarity over the story, and her husband thought the time had arrived to put the old ranchman's theory to the test.

"Barbara, do you know Joe McMurtry?" he questioned.

"You don't mean the foreman of the 2BarA outfit? Of course I do! Where is he? Have you seen him? How is the dear ranch? How do you come to know him?"

Fordyce watched the play of emotions over her face in amazement. Never before had he seen her so animated,— so in earnest,— and he caught his breath sharply as he noted how very lovely she was in her excitement.

A MODERN KNIGHT

"I'll tell you, some time," he laughed, "but now I want to ask you a question. Would you rather go out there and live on the home ranch, than in a house of my choosing,— anyway, for a while? "

"Oh, could I? Would you take me out there for a short time? "

He nodded his acquiescence, meanwhile watching her intently.

"And would you stay out there with me? "

"Indeed yes,— if you really wished me to do so. Are you sure you do? "

"Oh! oh! " she cried, "how good you are to me! Why *are* you so good? Don't you suppose we could just go out there at once, and leave the others to fight it out among themselves? "

"We can start tomorrow evening,— and it will be a wonderful ride, if it is full moonlight, as I believe it ought to be! We could not start any earlier, as I must see about some things,— some important things,— here, tomorrow morning," and his lips set in a line which boded no good to the object or objects of his thoughts. "Besides, you need many things, my dear,— you must have a trousseau, you know, to take the place of the one you are

A MODERN KNIGHT

leaving with Auntie,— and you can go out with me early tomorrow morning and we'll shop at the two French stores which I saw in my aimless wanderings about, this noon. No one would ever think of looking for little run-away Barbara Walton there, so you can shop to your heart's content! Now, good-night, and the pleasantest of dreams! This door opens into your bathroom, and when I go I will fasten the one beyond, and you can be perfectly comfortable." With this, and a cheery smile he vanished, closing the door firmly behind him.

.

In his own little room Fordyce sat dreaming out at the threatening night sky,— enjoying to the full the play of the jagged lightning and the answering roar and crack of the thunder, and the sound of the heavy downpour. He was much too happy to even think of sleep, and he mentally called down all the blessings in the calendar upon the head of the unconscious rancher for his advice,— for when he had held his young wife in his arms that evening he had realized, more than ever, how much it would mean to him to have her always ready to come into them. He was aroused from his waking

A MODERN KNIGHT

dreams by a peremptory rap upon the connecting door, and her gentle voice saying,

"Alton, let me in this minute, please,— I must talk to you some more!"

He sprang up and quickly threw back the lock, opening the door wide, and saw her, silhouetted against the brightness of her own room, blinking into the dusk of his.

"Why did you give up your nice room to me?" she demanded, instantly.

"What makes you think I did?" he parried, amused at her perspicacity.

"Because I found — this — in the closet," she returned, shyly, thrusting a soft silky bundle into his hands.

"Excuse me dear,— I left — this — in case you didn't think to bring any of your own things with you, to wear. I know it seems funny,— but it was the best I could do,— at short notice, — and some girls do wear — pajamas, you know,— don't they?"

It was rather a halting speech but Fordyce was flattering himself that he had thought quickly, for once, and disarmed her suspicions, when she petrified him with,

"That was more than kind of you,— but did you leave your shoe-trees, in case I might

A MODERN KNIGHT

need *them*, also? And your riding-crop for the same good reason?" She made the inquiry with a serious face, and then laughed merrily at the disgusted expression which overspread his face when he saw that he had been caught napping. Sobering instantly, she commanded, hastily,

"Turn on your light, at once! I intend to see that you are at least comfortably fixed, after giving up your lovely room to me."

The man hesitated for an instant, then reluctantly did as she requested. Barbara gasped. It was a tiny, single room,—almost a dressing room, in fact,—with one window and one small side bracket-light,—a sofa-bed and a couple of chairs, with a dresser in one corner. Alton's trunk occupied most of the available space between bed and dresser, and for lack of closet space his wearing apparel was distributed impartially over the different articles of furniture. The girl's eyes filled with sudden tears, and with all the abandon of a hurt child she threw herself into his arms, crying,

"You *shan't* do it! I won't *let* you! This little stuffy hole! I won't have it! Why, it isn't even meant for a real bedroom,—it's the parlor that goes with this suite,—and you shall not be so generous!"

A MODERN KNIGHT

Fordyce went red, then white with suppressed emotion as his arms, of their own volition, closed about the slender form, but he wisely did not attempt to caress her again, in any way. In a moment what he had anticipated took place. She disengaged herself from him with a little apologetic gesture, and began gathering up some of his things, as if to put them away for him.

"Listen, dear," put in her husband, quietly, "you are to go to bed at once,— and rest,— do you understand? — just plain *rest*,— and don't you dare to *think* of getting up until I call you, at seven o'clock! I shall spend a good part of what is left of the night in packing up for our departure, tomorrow,— and the remainder I expect I shall put in building 'Castles in Spain.' " He looked meaningly into her eyes as he led her to the door. "Sleep well,— and don't you worry over anything,— it's a pretty good old world, after all! "

She heard the inexorable click of the lock and was forced to be satisfied although she lay awake far into the night, her heart thrilling to the tones of his voice and the touch of his hands, and in a fair way (if her husband could only have known it!) to worship this big, bronzed man, who was so strong and resourceful, yet so tender and gentle with her.

CHAPTER TWELVE.



AFTER their breakfast the next morning Alton went with Barbara to the two shops which he had mentioned to her, and after informing the statuesque and somewhat supercilious proprietresses that his wife was in need of a complete wardrobe, and giving them *carte blanche* as to the supplying of it, he made his escape with the whispered word that he would be back for her in a couple of hours or so. Then he betook himself to the office of the most prominent lawyer in town, where he was closeted for the whole two hours. The lawyer made copious notes, and promised to keep him informed of the progress of the plan which Alton had suggested to him,—adding that if all the facts could be proved to the satisfaction of a court, it would resolve itself into a nice example of conspiracy to defraud, which was certainly a punishable offense.

He returned for Barbara about noon, by way of Cedar Street, and noticed, in passing,

A MODERN KNIGHT

that there seemed to be an unusual air of stir and suppressed excitement pervading the old place, but he gave it no further thought than to remark to himself, "Guess they are scouring the place for Barbara, about now!" He was chuckling, inwardly, when he passed the gate, until the door opened and a tall, broad-shouldered young fellow came swinging down the path to the street. He had a heavy, sullen expression, albeit what would pass for a considerable amount of manly beauty among a certain class of feminine admirers,—but For-dyce took instant exception to his shifty eyes, his chin which inclined to the "bull-dog" variety, and the coarse, thick lips which proclaimed all too clearly the moral fibre of the man. He shuddered as he thought of gentle little Barbara in the power of the young ruffian, even for a moment.

"Cousin John, damn him! And he looks really worried!" said the Englishman in an unconscious undertone, while the approaching man looked curiously at the pedestrian who was lowering at him and whose lips were moving in some unheard remark.

During luncheon he retailed for Barbara's amusement the glimpse he had obtained of her

A MODERN KNIGHT

persecutor, and finally succeeded in making her smile over his raillery. Also he informed her of his purchase of a couple of trunks into which her trousseau was to be packed at the shops, and then sent on to the ranch during the afternoon. He also said that he had despatched a message to Joe McMurtry, warning him of their contemplated arrival, some time about midnight. Then he commanded her to come out with him to purchase one complete outfit, to be put on immediately,—and when she wickedly suggested having her present costume done up in a bundle and carried back to her erstwhile guardians without even a word of explanation, his delight in the idea was unaffectedly boyish.

Their purchases made, they came back to their rooms, and while the girl made the exchange, the man completed his packing,—and then the package was despatched by a messenger. Like two children they laughed and made merry over their early dinner, and when the light, two-seated buckboard arrived before the door of the hotel, drawn by a pair of fleet-footed bronchos, they deposited their bags with the driver and settled themselves for their long moonlight ride with all the merriment and unrestraint of twelve years old.

A MODERN KNIGHT

It was a wonderful night,— such a night as one can see only on the great western prairies, — clear as a bell, with a sky of black velvet, picked out with sparkling points of light,— and sailing majestically over them, a shining, silvery moon which cast long shadows over the country all about them. Barbara relapsed gradually into silence when they were well under way, and Fordyce, respecting her mood, made no attempt at conversation, but lazily watched the moon-enchanted scenery and dreamed his dreams.

For a typically unemotional British subject, Alton Fordyce was doing a large amount of day-dreaming, these days, and it must be here admitted that the very idea that he could or would dream with his eyes open would have caused this same young man to give something very like a snort of disgust, only a couple of weeks earlier. He had always entertained a hearty contempt for those men who were addicted to this very thing which he was now doing so continually, and he was just beginning to appreciate what a huge difference is made by the particular angle from which one views a subject.

The silvery moonlight flooded the vast stretch of country all about them, and as he gazed out at it from the rapidly flying vehicle

A MODERN KNIGHT

he received the impression that they were drowning in a sea of luminous ether. He turned, meaning to call the attention of his silent companion to his fancy, but the words died, unuttered, upon his lips, as he gazed in speechless wonder at the girl by his side. In the clear, translucent moonshine, her filmy black gown and floating, diaphanous veil framed a little face which was startlingly ethereal and *spirituelle* in appearance. Her eyes were gazing straight ahead, out between the ears of the flying horses,—one hand lay in her lap, palm upward, while the other one, so white and slender, upon which sparkled Alton's rings, rested lightly upon the cushioned seat not over two inches from the man's side. Once or twice he was sorely tempted to cover it with his own, but he manfully resisted the impulse, and seeing that her consciousness was, in all probability, racing away many miles ahead of them, he solaced himself with drinking in her beauty and her delicate perfection to his heart's content. Was she really as innocent and confiding as she seemed, he wondered, or did she dimly appreciate the significance of this dash over these miles of prairie with him? He questioned if many girls of her age,—if brought up in other

A MODERN KNIGHT

and more normal surroundings — could have been prevailed upon to take the present trip, alone with him, out into this quiet immensity? To be sure, she was married to him, which, in one way seemed to mitigate the circumstances a trifle, but in another way their peculiar position and relations would warrant a bit of distrust upon the part of any girl. He caught himself surmising whether she had given a thought to just how frail and helpless she would have been in his hands if he chose to identify himself with the large proportion of the modern generation of young men,—willing and eager to take an unfair advantage of a girl, placed as she was, entirely in his power? And many men would have argued that the very fact of his marriage, even though only a nominal bond, would have entitled him to various and sundry privileges,—while Fordyce would have given worlds, at that moment, to have felt himself free to avail himself of even one or two minor favors, such as clasping the slender fingers, so temptingly near his own; but the desire was suppressed almost before it had attained a definite form.

Time flies, in direct violation of all known laws of speed when one is living in a world of fancy, and it was with a perceptible start that

A MODERN KNIGHT

the man saw that they were nearing their destination. Glancing at his companion, he found her still lost in the most profound reverie, so deep that repeated stirrings upon his part failed to elicit any response, and not until he had been forced to remark for the second time, "Here we are, Mrs. Fordyce," did she descend from her clouds sufficiently to notice her actual surroundings.

The long low ranch-house gleamed with hospitable light, and old Joe, himself, caught Barbara in his arms and lifted her down to the ground before her husband could claim the privilege. Alton,—prepared for a Spartan simplicity, which was his insular idea of a ranch,—was astounded to find himself being ushered into a long living-room, the polished floor of which was covered with beautiful and costly rugs; with row after row of book-cases, crammed to overflowing with fine editions; a tremendous fireplace, easily six feet in width; huge easy-chairs and "sleepy-hollow" couches; a concert-grand piano in the far corner; and above all — electricity!

Barbara had entered the house like one in a dream, and after quietly standing and gazing around upon each dearly remembered nook and

A MODERN KNIGHT

corner for a few moments, she turned to Alton with both hands extended in a gesture of welcome, saying,

"This is really and truly *home*,— I do so hope you will like it, as I do!"

It was so far removed from being the primitive place of his imagination that he found himself looking forward with untold interest and pleasure to even an indefinite sojourn at the "2BarA," and he finally said good-night and took himself off to bed with a pleasurable sensation of peace and contentment taking possession of his heart.

They had only been at the ranch two days when Alton received word that the "game had flown,"— the entire Walton family, accompanied by Alton's highly sympathetic lawyer, who evidently was hand in glove with the impostors, having pulled up stakes and disappeared between two days, leaving the place in charge of an elderly negro caretaker from whom absolutely no information could be obtained. The only concrete fact which could be gleaned was that Mr. Walton had drawn \$20,000 from the Laredo banks, the day before,— that sum being on deposit there in Barbara's name, but subject to himself as guardian,— and

A MODERN KNIGHT

that this sum had taken wings, along with him. It transpired later, in the course of the subsequent conferences necessary between Barbara's husband and the lawyer whom he engaged to put the affairs of the estate in proper order, that the man's name *was* Dixon, as Alton had surmised, and that he had quietly sold out his property in Laredo and taken up his residence in Butte, in order to call himself Walton, and so escape notice from any of his erstwhile friends while he engineered his little scheme of marrying his wealthy young ward into his own family circle.

.

To Alton, the ensuing weeks spent on the ranch constituted one of the most wonderful and delightful experiences of his delightfully varied career. Barbara was more than ever like a happy child, released from her more serious duties to run wild over the country which she had not seen for so long. She seemed indefatigable, and many and many a night the husky young Englishman betook himself to his bed, too tired in both mind and body to do aught save fall into heavy, dreamless slumber. On fine days there were long rides on horseback, to visit all those particular haunts which she loved from

A MODERN KNIGHT

her childish recollection of them,— then she must go over every foot of the huge ranch with big Joe McMurtry,— she must see each animal, meet each man, and listen to tale after tale of her dead father and mother. On rainy days there was always a blazing fire in the big stone fireplace, and many were the hours spent by the two in browsing among the fascinating shelves of the library and in comparing notes as to their personal likes and dislikes of the great names enshrined upon those well-filled walls.

It was a long time before Barbara could bring herself to don any of the lovely things which she had brought with her, and Fordyce had ceased to urge it, not liking to appear too insistent upon his own desires. It seemed to him that, of late, Barbara had grown a little more responsive,— and at times he had caught her studying him intently when she thought his attention was safely occupied in another direction. He was sure that her hand lingered a wee bit longer in his, now-a-days, at their morning and evening salutations, and with all his might he held himself in leash, sternly and absolutely refusing to allow his manner to change by so much as a hair's breadth from the cheery, big-brother type of affection which he

A MODERN KNIGHT

had adopted as the surest and safest guard for his unruly feelings.

At last, when their stay at the ranch had prolonged itself into the seventh week, Fordyce received a large budget of English mail, which, for some unaccountable reason, had been held for a time at the hotel in Butte. One letter was from Frances Stanhope (now Frances Stanhope Fordyce!), demanding that he come home at once, and bring his little bride straight to her, at her old home, where she and Harry were now living until the wrath of his father should have cooled a little and their plans could be more carefully matured. She assured him that she knew that she (Frances) would just *love* Barbara, and that Alton's step-mother was just as eager as herself to welcome the bride. Also she imparted the news that the old Baronet was ill, — from a sudden stroke of apoplexy, it was said, — and she thought his eldest son should be thinking of returning home at once, to take his rightful place by the old man's side.

Another letter was from his step-mother and he hurriedly tore it open.

Dearest Alton (she wrote),
You could have knocked me
down with a feather when Fanny read

A MODERN KNIGHT

me your letter to her, and finally forced it into my head what an astonishing thing you had done! Such a foolishly chivalrous thing, dear, and yet so very like what one might have expected of your big-hearted, boyish notions of duty! At least I am glad, on your account, that the child is so sweet and gentle and attractive, and I sincerely hope she is all your letter says. Anyway, my dear boy, bring her home to me, and you know I shall love her for your sake, and I hope, for her own, as well.

Harry and Fan eloped a couple of weeks ago, which escapade has thoroughly incensed your father, and I can't help surmising that, now, he would give a good deal to have his "big boy" back to depend upon, if only it wouldn't humble his pride too much to ask it of you! He is a pretty feeble old man, Alton, and I think if, some day, you should just appear here in your old place, and drop into your accustomed niche in the home affairs, he would be more than glad to get you back again,—and no questions asked! I have given instructions to the solicitors to forward to you, under safe conveyance, the smaller box of your mother's jewels,

A MODERN KNIGHT

which I feel sure you *ought* to want for Barbara, now,—although the larger case can wait until she comes to take her proper place here. She wouldn't have much use for the family jewels out there on a wild western ranch, but she will expect something of the sort from you, in all probability. (Here Alton smiled openly, as he thought how little his wife seemed to expect of him, in *any* way, let alone family jewels and position!)

Tell Barbara that we are all waiting to welcome her with open arms, and that I shall come to Liverpool to be the first to greet you, at any time you may appoint! With much love, always affectionately, the
“Mater.”

Enclosed in his letter was a note for Barbara, which Alton laid in a conspicuous position upon her writing-desk, and having hastily perused his other mail, he changed his clothes and betook himself to his horse for a long ride before dinner, “to give his new perplexities an airing,” as he expressed it to himself. He had much to think about which bothered and puzzled him more than he realized, and his ride unconsciously extended over a larger territory

A MODERN KNIGHT

than he had designed, so that it was after six when he finally entered the house, with apologies already framed for his tardiness.

Instead of his wife dressed and waiting for his late arrival he was amazed to find Barbara stretched at full length upon the couch before the fire which had burned out to a bed of glowing embers, her cheek pillowed upon her hand, and her eyes closed in profound slumber. The light from the dying fire played fitfully over her sweet face, and it was not until Fordyce had been seated for some moments in the chimney-corner that he made the discovery that she was not completely attired, and that there were traces of tears upon her long lashes. Evidently she had paused, midway in the process of dressing for dinner, donned a soft, clinging, silky thing, and run down stairs for something,—then fallen asleep before the fire. His step-mother's note was gone from her desk, and he wondered what she could have said to make his sensitive little wife feel badly,—or what was troubling her. The big Englishman was visibly embarrassed when his keen and loving scrutiny disclosed the fact that her white lounging-robe had become disarranged, so that one white shoulder was just peeping out of its soft covering, and he feasted

A MODERN KNIGHT

his eyes upon it and her unconscious loveliness as long as he dared. Then tiptoeing out to the piazza, he closed the door with a bang and stamped his feet heavily to give warning of his approach.

When he finally entered the room, his vision had fled and he went off to dress in anything but a pleasant humor. As he stood in the living-room, an hour later, waiting for Barbara to make her appearance, he wondered what she would say if she were to know of his deliberate spying upon her, *en negligée*,—before dinner. Across his musings swept a radiant little figure which made the beholder catch his breath for a moment,—a vision of fleecy blue and white tulle, with silver knots on the bodice and around the skirt,—a vision which halted before him, swept him an exaggerated courtesy, and then held out a friendly hand to his.

“How do you like it?” she questioned.

“I think you must be a dream-princess,” returned Alton, forcing a laugh to hide the break in his voice. “I’m so afraid I’ll wake up and find you gone that I hardly dare to breathe. Are you sure you’re *real*?”

“Most prosaically real,—as you ought to know, by this time! Dinner was announced

A MODERN KNIGHT

some time ago, and I am quite ready for it,—come!” and she tripped lightly ahead of him in the direction of the dining-room.

From the appearance of the bountifully spread table with its hot-house flowers and its softly shaded candles, one could never surmise that all about them stretched miles upon miles of sand and sage-brush,—for two of the late owner’s pet hobbies had been his greenhouses and his electric-light plant,—and Fordyce tried to picture to himself the open-eyed astonishment of his family and friends if they could have taken one peep in upon that little tableau of their dinner-hour. As the meal progressed, the man found his mind again running upon the old topic of how sweet and dainty the girl opposite him looked in this, the first one of her new gowns to be tried on. He had never seen her in full evening attire, and the pink shaded lights, gleaming so softly on her white neck and beautifully rounded shoulders and arms, affected him more than he liked to admit, even to himself. The daintiness and witchery of her caused his blood to race through his veins as strong wine might have done, and he was surprised to find that his normally healthy appetite was actually suffering from the proximity of this slip of a girl across the table from him. As dessert

A MODERN KNIGHT

came on and the Chinese servant left them alone to finish their meal he thought of telling her of his home letters and of his double call to resume his old place in the home affairs,— then at some trifling remark of hers he decided to put off the evil moment as long as possible. That it would prove an exceedingly evil moment for him, he had not the last doubt,— for he had no idea that his wife would be willing to go back with him, as yet.

He felt that his duty pointed that he should return to England at once,— for as eldest son, so many burdens could be assumed by his broad shoulders which would perceptibly lighten the cares of the old Baronet, and make the days of his declining years more comfortable. But, on the other hand, would Barbara be willing to leave her lately re-discovered country and go with him to his people? Would she care to take the long journey back, only to face the latent, if unexpressed curiosity which would necessarily meet her upon every side? He was still pre-occupied and puzzling over the problem when they rose from the table and settled themselves in the cosy living room where Barbara busied herself with some trifling bit of embroidery, while her companion lighted his old pipe and sat for some time moodily gazing into the fire.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN.



LAST Barbara broke the long silence.

"You never said how you liked the dress," she remarked tentatively, with a shy look at his bowed head.

"It's a perfect stunner!" returned For-dyce, succinctly. "I had almost given up hope of your wearing any of them!"

"Thank you, Alton, for not insisting," she said, slowly,— "somehow, it was very hard to make the break and take off the black,— just at first,— and I didn't know that you —"

"I know,— I know," murmured the man,— "that's why I stopped urging you to hurry about it. But now — do you know how lovely you are in that thing, child?"

"Am I really?" parried Barbara, dimpling gleefully. "No one ever called me lovely before!"

"Probably no one was ever fortunate enough to see you in an evening-gown before, were they?"

A MODERN KNIGHT

"Of course not! You *know* perfectly well that I never *had* one before! But why are you so solemn, this evening, Alton? Have you had any bad news from home? Mrs. Fordyce wrote me a sweet little letter of welcome!" but he noted that she evinced no intention of showing it to him, and wondered at the omission.

Fordyce drew one long breath and took the plunge. He felt that it was now or never, and the perplexing thing had better be decided at once and have the suspense over with. He drew his step-mother's letter and the one from Frances from his pocket, and bending over his wife where she sat in the sofa corner, he laid them both, opened, in her lap with a gesture which commanded her to read. Then he sat down in the opposite corner of the big couch and studied her intently.

At first she smiled a little as she read,—then looked preternaturally sober as she finished and handed them back to him.

"Are you going?" she inquired.

"I'm not at all sure!" returned the man, seriously.

Barbara appeared to be trying to frame some question exactly to her liking and she sat

A MODERN KNIGHT

with knitted brows, intently regarding the open fire for several moments. Then discarding her intended interrogation,

"Am I going, if you *do*?" was her next sudden query.

Alton regarded her keenly for the space of a full minute,—then laughed shortly.

"That's exactly what I've been asking myself, ever since the letter came, and I am apparently no nearer a solution of the problem than I was before it ever came up!"

"What a dreadfully foolish boy it is," smiled Barbara, tenderly,— "when — no! I will not tease! But why ask useless questions of yourself, when you should ask them of the person most intimately concerned? Do you *wish* me to go?"

"Not if you would really rather not! Of course I don't want to leave you, but if you positively wouldn't like to go, so suddenly, I might *have* to go over alone, for a little while,— and I certainly do not wish to leave you out here where there isn't even one other woman on the place! And yet,— where could you go,— and be safe?"

"With you, of course," answered Barbara, softly.

A MODERN KNIGHT

"*What!*" The face of the Englishman was a study in mixed emotions,—surprise and delight being the most prominent. "You don't mean it, do you, Girl?"

"Well—don't bite me!" protested the girl, laughingly. "Pray, Sir Man! Why shouldn't your wife go home with you, to be presented to your family,—unless, perchance, you are ashamed of her?"

It was a flagrant provocation, of a kind which Alton would not have believed she knew the art, but it had the desired effect of overthrowing his moodiness. He dropped to his knees beside her and lifting a soft trailing end of filmy tulle, held it to his lips.

"*That's* just *how* ashamed of her," and his voice broke a little. "There's no one over there who can begin to hold a candle to you, my dear,—and I shall be so happy and proud to take you over with me, when the time comes. Now, what did the Mater say to you in her letter? Aren't you going to show it to me?"

Barbara flushed,—most becomingly, it must be admitted,—and took a letter from her work basket, as if intending to show it to him,—then blushed more deeply and thrust it back into the depths of the basket. Alton sat with his eyes

A MODERN KNIGHT

fastened upon her countenance, watching in amazement as the crimson tide suffused her face and even imparted a faint pink glow to the lovely neck and shoulders. Why,—oh, why must she be so exquisitely entrancing, when he, by his own arrangement, was cut off from any demonstrations of affection except such as might be permitted to a big brother? And those,—according to Alton's ethics,—meant very meagre satisfaction indeed.

“Please,—not now! Some time I'll show you,—but not tonight! I'll tell you what we'll do! Now that, perhaps, we're going to be ‘produced’ for the inspection of our grand ‘in laws’ over the sea, I'll try on all these costumes and see how they suit your High Mightiness—and if they will do for England. You can lie here at your ease and I will pass in review before you! Now, don't object! The audience will please be seated,—and the performance will begin in no time!”

She flitted away and Alton stretched himself lazily on the vacated sofa to watch for her reappearance, which was not long delayed. Creation followed creation until the man's head fairly spun with the kaleidoscopic array of pale shades which advanced gayly from one door,—

A MODERN KNIGHT

paused to turn soberly around before him,— and then made their exit by the other doorway. She certainly was lovely, and it seemed to the interested watcher that in each new costume she was more wonderful than in the last. Finally she said, shyly,

“There’s just one more,— a heavenly lavender one,— but I can’t do it up the back! Perhaps you — I wonder if you would mind?”

Without waiting for his answer she fled up to her room and straightway returned, holding up trailing draperies of palest violet over white, heavy with white bead-work and trimmed with wreaths of little chiffon rosebuds, and waited for Alton to fasten the rows and rows of intricate hooks which formed a labyrinth about the back of the gown. The man’s hands were clumsy, partly through his inexperience and partly through embarrassment, and more than once his fingers came into direct contact with the cool, white shoulders. All of the primeval man in his make-up was aroused, his blood was racing madly through his veins at the nearness of her, — at the delicious sense of intimacy implied by the mere act of assisting at her toilette,— and the strain of subduing his natural feelings was beginning to be more than he could bear. Sud-

A MODERN KNIGHT

denly, as a little tendril of her hair brushed his cheek as he bent to his task, his abnormal control over himself gave away, and pushing Barbara away from him, almost roughly, he flung himself out of the room and rushed upstairs to his own apartment where he walked the floor with folded arms and tightly clenched teeth until far into the night.

Back and forth — back and forth he paced, — six strides one way, — turn, — six strides back again, — turn, — then the same dreary round over again, while his brain was in a chaos of futile rebellion at the foolish circumstances in which he had placed himself in his effort to be absolutely fair to the girl he had married. About once a minute he asked himself why, in the name of all things reasonable and unreasonable, he had ever come out to this ranch with her, in the first place? Why could he not have been content to allow her to come out here alone and stay for a while? Why had he ever put himself in a position that he might have known would become more than mere mortal man could stand? It made no difference how often he assured himself that he must be patient, — must lead the life he had mapped out for himself (and which he had so fatuously informed Allerton that he

A MODERN KNIGHT

was strong enough to carry out!) for perhaps many years to come! Who could tell? Anyway, it must go on until she gave him leave to change,—and she had promised to let him know, honestly, if she ever came to love him as he wished her to,—what more could a man ask for? And yet,—he did *ask* for more — much more! He had been a blind, blind fool,—in his proud belief in the strength of his better nature,—in his own strength,—and in his utter and unrealized ignorance of the meaning of real love and passion! And yet,—sometimes, when she was so near and so alluring, he was sorely tempted to catch her in his arms,—even roughly, if need be,—to hold her close and shower his kisses on the sweet childish face, the unspoiled mouth and the great, wondering eyes,—to see if the real woman-soul within her could not be forced to awaken under the rush and passion of his own ardent feelings. And the maddening part of the whole thing was that he knew perfectly well that he neither *could* or *would* do any one of these things,—that he should meet her on the morrow just as he had any day for all these long weeks (except that he should have to ask her pardon for leaving her so abruptly, this evening.) He wondered

A MODERN KNIGHT

if she had understood how he felt, and why he had rushed off so precipitately, leaving her standing, a little disconsolate figure in her strange finery, gazing after him with a puzzled frown and trembling on the brink of tears. Anyway, if she should be cool and distant in her manner,—as she well might be,—and seemed to expect an apology, of course he would make one, and tell her as much as he decently could of the cause of his action,—but if she should be just as usual,—if she simply ignored the whole unfortunate occurrence,—then — his heart gave a great bound of excitement! — then it could only mean one thing,—that she had come to a realization of how things were with him, and that her own heart was not absolutely unresponsive!

Just as he arrived at this point in his musings he was startled by what sounded like a smothered sob on the other side of the door to her room which he was at that moment passing in his restless walking to and fro. Could she be crying? He paused in his circuit of the room and listened intently. Yes! She certainly *was* weeping, and the sound of the choked-down sobs brought him to himself as a dash of cold water would have done. What a fool he

A MODERN KNIGHT

was,— a fool and a brute, as well! — only thinking of himself and his own discomforts, when here she had been, nobody knew how long, — probably cut to the heart by his boorish treatment of her! He must crush down his own discontent over their arrangements and try to make her as happy as he could, under the peculiar circumstances!

If he could only have known what was going on in the girl's mind at that moment, his spirits would have risen like an inflated balloon, instead of dropping like so much lead as he tapped softly on the door to attract her attention.

“ Barbara,” he called, gently.

She appeared to be oblivious to his solicitude, and he stood with one hand upon the knob, and his whole immense frame thrown forward against the door panels, listening with anxiety and fear tugging at his heart-strings, while the sobs grew quieter and came at longer intervals, — but still no answer to his voice. At last he shook the door and spoke more urgently.

“ Barbara Girl! What is it? Are you ill? Can't I do anything? Only speak to me, dear! ”

He must have turned the door handle, ever so little, unconsciously, for all at once the door against which he had been leaning swung easily

A MODERN KNIGHT

and quietly back upon its hinges and left him in the doorway, staring blankly into the room. For a long moment he was dazed. How came that door to open? The door which he had fastened with his own hands the evening of their arrival at the ranch? The door which he had fastened securely, and then given Barbara the key with the remark, "I suppose it will look more natural to the 'Chink' if we have these connecting rooms, little girl,—but the door is locked, and you may keep the key, yourself!" He was busy, reconstructing, in his mind's eye, the peculiar expression which he remembered her face had worn, as she had thanked him for the key, when he beheld a little heap of tumbled finery on the floor before the dead fire. He had not dared glance in the direction of the bed, before, being so sure that it would be occupied, but now, one hasty look told him that it had not been slept in, and a surreptitious peep at the clock on mantel showed a quarter of one! Evidently the poor child had been grieving over his rudeness for the greater part of four hours, and his heart smote him as he spoke once more, quite quietly, in order not to startle her.

"Barbara, dear, can't you tell me what is the trouble?"

A MODERN KNIGHT

She started, as if coming back from some far flight of fancy, and looked up into his calm face as he stood there so tall and quiet, beside her,— then she smiled, a rather April-like smile, to be sure,— for crystal drops still hung on her long lashes,— and held out her hands to be assisted to her feet.

“ Why has my little ‘ Dream Princess ’ been weeping? ” demanded Alton, playfully.

“ Don’t ask me now,— please don’t ask me! ” she replied, shaking her head.

“ Is it the way in which I behaved? At least you will tell me that,— or I shall feel very uncomfortable! ”

“ No — it has nothing at all to do with that! Now don’t apologize,— for I am sure I understood it.”

“ Oh, my dear! ” exclaimed Alton, “ you understood? ” Then catching himself up quickly, and with a sudden change of tone, he demanded, sternly, “ Barbara! How came that door to be unlocked? ”

The girl smiled an inscrutable little smile.

“ I unlocked it, myself, ten minutes after you gave me the key! ”

“ And you mean to tell me that it has been like that, all these weeks, when I distinctly told you to the contrary? ”

A MODERN KNIGHT

"Yes — I mean just that."

"Barbara, why do you delight in making it so hard for me to live up to our agreement? Is it your idea to test me? Because if it is — where is that key?"

"Here," answered she, taking it from a drawer in her desk.

"Give it to me,— and I'll lock it for keeps, *this* time!" exclaimed Fordyce decidedly, extending his hand.

"On the contrary, I think I will take care of it myself," returned the girl and still with the wise little smile which the man couldn't understand she walked deliberately to the window and stood gazing out into the night.

"Barbara, dear, please give it to me," urged the man as one would speak to a refractory child,— "you know how I feel towards you,— you know what I promised you there in the train! Don't make me break my word about your person by trying to take it from you by force! Frankly — I don't trust myself!"

The slender girl before him raised her hand and with all her strength flung the key far away into the night, and turned to meet the man's startled gaze, holding out both hands to his, saying,

A MODERN KNIGHT

“But you see, I have more confidence in you than you have in yourself! Now good-night (or rather good-morning!)—go to bed, at once, as I shall,—and in the morning we will talk about England, again!”

Alton stood silent, clasping the little hands in his and with his gaze fastened closely upon her, as if hypnotized, noting the implicit trust and confidence in her face,—also that she still wore the treacherous gown which had worked his own undoing earlier in the evening. He wondered how, after his permitting his feelings to run away with him so, earlier that night, she could be brave enough to trust him again, even if it was, as he more than half suspected, the bravery of innocence,—and he admired her all the more for it. He then and there registered a vow that he would win her unqualified respect, whether or not it should be vouchsafed to him to gain her love. After what seemed an eternity of silence to the man’s wrought-up nerves, she raised her face to his, mutely inviting the kiss which he reverently placed upon her forehead, and then he returned to his room,—but not to sleep!

On her own side of the door, Barbara, after waiting until all was quiet in the next room, care-

A MODERN KNIGHT

fully laid the lavender gown away in the lowest tray of the trunk, and extinguished her light, whispering to herself,

“There! *You* won't see the light again until he needn't run away to keep from showing his feelings,—and I don't think that time is so very far away, either!”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN.

“ONIGHT, we will be at Fairmead,” remarked the tall man leaning on the ship’s rail, to the little figure in cap and steamer-coat, by his side. “Do you dread it as much as you feared you would?”

“No-o-o, not exactly ‘dread’ it,” hesitated his companion, “but I can’t help wishing it was all over, though! Do you think they will like me, really?”

“Surest thing you know!” answered Alton merrily. “They’re bound to!”

“Do you really think everyone will be nice to me, just because you have married me and brought me home with you?”

Alton’s face took on a stern expression, as he patted her shoulder and answered, “Well, if they’re not,—then someone is bound to get hurt,—that’s all! But of course they will, Girlie! The mater is just the finest ever,—and the Governor is true blue, if he is crusty on the surface. Fan is a dear girl, and you will

A MODERN KNIGHT

like her,— and as for Harry, he's young, and inclined to be a bit 'freshie,' but he is as fine a chap as ever lived, and he will adore you, in a week. Don't look so worried, it is only his way,— and Fanny won't mind it in the least,— they have known each other all their lives, you know, and she is used to him."

The day was one of those gorgeous blue and gold color symphonies which cause one to catch one's breath in sheer wondering amaze that anything so transcendently beautiful should be permitted to this wicked world, and Mr. and Mrs. Alton Fordyce were idly watching the hustle and bustle attendant upon the landing of any transatlantic liner. Soon they joined the stream of departing passengers, and at the first available spot for an outsider to greet them, Barbara was smothered in the motherly embrace of a pair of long arms, while a cheery voice said, over her head, with an accent of haste,

"Well, Alton dear, here I am, as I promised! How finely you do look, boy! I am so glad to get hold of you both,— and I thought you would *never* come ashore. Dear child, lift up your face, and let me have a look at you! *Well*, no wonder this stolid young man surrendered at once, without a shot fired! I would

A MODERN KNIGHT

myself! But, gracious, child, how old did he say you were? Surely you can't be nineteen!"

Amid much laughing talk and chatter they were finally ensconced in a first-class carriage, en route for Fairmead. Mrs. Fordyce, cheerful and full of delight at Alton's return, sat with Barbara, the two of them facing the big man, whose unaffected pleasure at this cordial welcome was patent to all who happened to glance at his beaming face, and Barbara took an immediate liking to this wholesome, elderly woman whose hair was turning gray, and who looked at her so kindly. The elder woman, evidently realizing that in her shyness at the meeting and in her unaccustomed surrounding, the girl would care to talk little, had contented herself with prattling to Alton like a school girl, giving him the home news and the gossip of the little town, only asking some question of her young companion at long intervals, and the girl listened with a wide-awake interest to all the chronicles of the home doings. Occasionally she answered some question about her trip, and after a while the conversation lagged, until the guard announced the little station which was their destination.

A MODERN KNIGHT

The next few hours passed like a dream to Barbara,— the ride from the tiny doll-house of a station in the quiet golden afternoon, through the peaceful English country-side,— the gray old Hall, with its turrets overgrown with ivy and creepers, and its huge iron gates with the Fordyce arms carved in the panels,— the afternoon-tea, informal, and served in the dark oak-paneled hall,— and then the long and most formal dinner, presided over by the old Baronet, who had insisted upon taking his place at the head of the table upon the night of his son's return to his home. He had welcomed his new daughter-in-law with all the impressive ceremony of his old-fashioned courtesy, and a rather stiff formality, but beyond the necessary civilities he declined to go, appearing to view her with more or less suspicion. His only direct acknowledgment of her at the dinner-table was to politely inquire if she did not find it inconvenient, living in a section of the country where she could only see Indians about her,— and when Barbara replied, just as seriously as he had put the question, that one liked Indians very much better than some white people, when one came to know them, he made a queer little noise in his throat, and gave her a more approving glance than any

A MODERN KNIGHT

she had been favored with before; while Fordyce could have hugged her for the tactful manner in which she had humored the old man without once attempting to correct his erroneous impression of her country.

Mrs. Fordyce insisted upon Barbara's retiring early after the fatigues of her long journey, and her quiet influence was of so much avail that nine o'clock found the girl ready for bed, leaning upon her window-ledge and gazing dreamily out at the night sky with its soft blackness and its twinkling stars. With a preliminary soft tap Mrs. Fordyce entered and advanced on tiptoe to the dreaming girl, laying her hand lightly upon her hair. Barbara looked up with a smile and welcomed her.

"Come, dearie," began the elder woman, "let me tuck you up in bed, and then if you are not sleepy and feel that you would like to talk awhile, I'd love to stay with you as long as you wish me."

Barbara submitted, and after persuading her companion to sit close to the tremendous four-posted bed in which she felt almost lost, she began to answer Mrs. Fordyce's questions,—hesitatingly and shyly, at first, but as she warmed up to her subject she forgot all her self-conscious-

A MODERN KNIGHT

ness and launched out into her story as simply and naturally as she had told it to Alton, with the essential difference that now she could go farther into details and explain the particulars of the bogus relatives and their plot against her.

Alton's step-mother led her on, tactfully and cleverly, to talk of their days at the 2BarA ranch—and all the good times they had enjoyed there, and she finally rose, saying,

“Now you ought to go to sleep, dearie,—and I must go and send those two men off to bed,—else they will talk all night. You must forgive me, childie, for tucking you away off here in this corner by yourself, but you see, I do know a little something of your domestic arrangements, and the locksmith whom we ordered to attend to the doors of the regular guest suite failed to appear. We'll have him tomorrow!”

“But, dear Mrs. Fordyce, believe me, it is not at all necessary!” expostulated the girl, and she rapidly recounted to the older woman the story of the night which had culminated in her husband's and her difference of opinion over the key, and which she had omitted before from some undefined feeling that it was not necessary

A MODERN KNIGHT

to the clearness and lucidity of her narrative. Mrs. Fordyce gasped.

“My *dear* child! You are the most astonishing piece of humanity that I have ever come across! No wonder Alton is thoroughly fascinated by you! Any man would be flattered to be treated as a Deity, instead of a mere man! But you may just thank your lucky stars that you have fallen into the hands of a clean, decent-minded young fellow like Alton,—and do you think you can ever learn to love him as he deserves? If you are ever going to want your freedom, for pity’s sake, take it now,—for he cares more than I would have believed him capable of caring for anyone,—and the boy is too manly and true to deserve a broken heart at your hands, in payment for his Quixotic foolishness! You are too young to realize how much his reserve and his almost superhuman control over himself are costing him,—but it breaks my heart to see it. He is so frightfully changed since he went away! If you weren’t such a child, I could make you understand better.”

“Perhaps I *do* understand,—more than you know,” whispered Barbara, holding tightly to Mrs. Fordyce’s hand. “Can’t you see that ever since that night when he rushed away from

A MODERN KNIGHT

me so hurriedly, I have been realizing more and more what it means to him to keep that promise he gave me? And truly — I didn't ask it of him! He was so dear and kind and 'trustable' that I think I would have married him, anyway, — feeling that anything was better than Cousin John, — but he insisted that I was to be his wife in name only, — and his little sister in all other respects, — and it is perfectly true that at that time I didn't know what a very wonderful thing he was doing. I know better — now — and — ”

“ You mean — ? ” demanded Mrs. Fordyce.

“ I mean that during those long hours when I was crouched on the rug before the fire in my room, listening to him, striding up and down his floor until early morning, it suddenly broke in on me, like a great light, what his strange actions meant. And I think the child in me died, then and there, and the woman was born, — for I understood how sorely tried he must be, — understood — and — was glad! ”

“ Glad! ” repeated her listener, quickly.

“ Yes, *glad!* ” affirmed the girl. “ Glad because — well, because then I knew in a flash that I cared for him, — really was beginning to care in the way he would like to have me, — and now,

A MODERN KNIGHT

this comradeship has come to mean almost as much to me as it does to him,— it is a symbol of his utter trustworthiness,— and oh! I love it! ”

“ Then, for Heaven’s sake, Barbara, why let him torture himself with the idea that you are indifferent? Why not let him know the truth? It’s worth a good deal to him. Let me tell him for you,— there’s a dear,— be a good child and let me do it, and everyone will be so much happier! ”

Barbara’s face, as she sat upright in bed, gleamed in the half-light from the open hall door and her voice shook a trifle.

“ Please, no, Mrs. Fordyce! I would rather tell him myself when I am sure the right time has arrived. You see, I made a promise that if that time ever came I would tell him honestly, — and he trusts me to keep my word.”

“ But, dear child, it will be a hard thing for you to tell him yourself, and if you would only allow me to give him the littlest hint, he would so gladly do all the rest! He could make it so easy for you,— why not, dearie? ”

“ No,” insisted Barbara, soberly, “ you see, it is this way. It seems now as if I would never be able to tell him,— for it looks pretty hard, — but every day it grows more and more easy,

A MODERN KNIGHT

until I don't think I shall really mind at all. And I have a feeling that when the really *right* time comes, it isn't going to be hard at all — just the natural thing to do! I shall know by that!”

“Very well, dearie,— just as you think best, — but you are certainly an odd child! Good-night, now, and pleasant dreams,— and remember, I am not Mrs. Fordyce to you any more than to Alton. He calls me ‘Mater.’” And she drifted out, closing the door softly behind her, and betook herself to the library below where Alton and his father were deep in a discussion of the political situation, as naturally as if there had not been more than ten weeks of complete estrangement.

Several weeks later the old man had recovered sufficiently to risk a three days trip up to London to consult a specialist, and the ancient house had settled down once more to its customary habit of repose and quiet. The old-fashioned garden with its formal little rows of box hedges and its immaculate bricked paths was looking its best in brave array of reds, gold and browns,— all its beauties flung to the fore to make an imposing stand against the on-

A MODERN KNIGHT

slaughters of the expected enemy, Jack Frost. It was late in the evening, and the harmonies of the garden had long ago been blotted out by a thick, brooding darkness which could almost be felt, and which came in through the windows of the house laden with the faint spicy odor of chrysanthemums and spruce. A storm was brewing in the east which boded no good to those unfortunate enough to be caught out in its grasp.

In the big, square hall, which was used as a general living-room, with its huge stone fireplace and built-in chimney seats at right angles to the hearth, a lamp burned steadily upon a central table, but the edges of the wainscotted old room were in semi-darkness, for the blaze on the hearth was wavering and fitful and not at all minded to do its share toward the general cheeriness. Mrs. Fordyce was working busily in the circle of soft, yellow light and sustaining a desultory conversation with someone several feet away in the shadows by the fire. Barbara had retired on the plea of a letter to write, and finally the silence became too oppressive for the woman to endure.

"Alton dear, you're not happy,—I know that!" she ventured, affectionately.

A MODERN KNIGHT

"Of course I am!" promptly responded Alton's voice from the shadows.

"Nonsense!" expostulated his step-mother. "Don't you suppose I have a pair of perfectly good eyes in my head, and that I can see how this thing irks you, day in and day out? Your sense of duty is too strong for your common sense, and it runs away with it and you, too!"

Alton puffed a cloud of fragrant smoke into the air and dreamily watched it ascend in little quivering spirals until it was lost among the railings of the balcony which surrounded the central opening into the hall from the floor above. She waited some time, and as he seemed not intending to vouchsafe any answer, she demanded,

"Of course it is none of my business, Boy, but — why did you ever make such a foolish promise?"

"That same much maligned sense of duty, Mater, which you have just remarked upon!" returned the victim of her cross-questioning. "You didn't think I could be cad enough to take such an advantage over that child as it would have been without that promise, did you?"

"You couldn't be a cad, dear, if you tried your hardest,—it isn't in you! But do you

A MODERN KNIGHT

really think the game is worth the candle? Is she worth it all?"

"There's not her equal on earth, Mater,—I'm more convinced of it every day! That's what makes it so hard,—and so imperative that I win her regard!"

"But it is so hard on you, dear! She doesn't realize that,—being only a child in some things, and having had a peculiar education,—but how can you bear it? Every glance, every fleeting touch, every time she appeals to you in that pretty, pleading way of hers, must be exquisite torture to you, when you love her so. I saw you go white when she laid her arm across your knee, before the fire, last night,—and I don't see how you manage to endure it!"

"If you insist upon the truth,—it's a veritable hell upon earth, Mater!" exploded Fordyce, rising and striding up and down the room.

Mrs. Fordyce looked sorrowfully up at the big fellow whose face had all the aspect of a troubled boy and took her courage by the throat, metaphorically speaking.

"Listen, dear," she began, quietly, "would you like me to tell you a secret,—one which might help to comfort your poor starved heart

A MODERN KNIGHT

a little bit?" But before she had finished her question Alton was standing before her, tall and straight and commanding.

"No, thank you, Mater," he said, "there is only one secret which could do what you say, and that must come directly from Barbara's lips! If you could truthfully swear that she had told you that she returned my love,—still I would decline to let you say it. She made a promise, as well as I,—and until she wishes to fulfill it, the matter had really better drop!"

"Alton!" ventured a timid little voice, and both its hearers gave a guilty start while Alton colored painfully as Barbara's head appeared over the railing above. "Don't go to bed till I come down,—I want to talk to you. You'll wait?"

"Certainly I'll wait," replied Alton, and then as they heard her door close he turned to his companion with a look of entreaty.

"Lordy! You don't suppose she heard all *that*, do you, Mater? I wouldn't have had it overheard for a good deal! I don't want anyone to think that I'm 'cry-babying' over something I went into with my eyes wide open!"

Mrs. Fordyce smiled a very knowing smile as she hastily gathered up her sewing para-

A MODERN KNIGHT

phernalia and prepared for flight. "Discretion itself, you see, Alton," she laughed as he watched her in amazed silence, "and my feminine intuition tells me there is electricity in the air! I think things are about to happen, dear!"

"What things?" demanded Alton breathlessly.

"I shall wait up awhile," continued she, playfully stroking his tall head in passing, "and if you *should* have anything of importance to tell me, you know where to find me," and she had vanished before the man was really aware of her departure.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN.



UPSTAIRS, Barbara, who had accidentally overheard, while passing around the balcony, most of the conversation between Fordyce and his step-mother, was hurrying with all the speed her trembling fingers would allow, into the lavender gown which she had ruthlessly snatched from the trunk the moment she entered her room. She fastened it as well as she could, then drew a filmy scarf over her shoulders to hide all discrepancies, clasped her one letter from Mrs. Fordyce in her hand, and ventured to peep timidly over the railing. Yes,—Mrs. Fordyce was gone, and Alton stood with his back to her, deep in thought, gazing down into the fire and entirely oblivious to his surroundings.

Barbara hesitated no longer. Her heart seemed to be trying to knock its way out through her side and her face was radiant as she glided quietly down the stairs and gently laid her hand on Alton's arm.

A MODERN KNIGHT

He started, and gazed down on the little figure in the well-remembered gown as if she was a visitor from some other world. As his mind took in her exalted expression as well as her costume, and the letter in her hand, he demanded,

"What do you mean by turning into a dream-princess again, young lady?"

"Please don't tease me," returned the girl with a tremor in her low voice. "I have a lot of things to tell you, and you must listen patiently, until I am quite done,—and you mustn't touch me!"

"Barbara!" Alton spoke sternly, and in rather a hurt tone. "Haven't I always respected your wishes in that matter?"

"Oh dear! Now I have begun all wrong! I mean just that you might wish to do it — and that I might let you — and it would spoil what I have to do — you see?"

"Mm-m-m. Yes, I see," assented the man slowly.

"Now, please sit down on this seat, and I'll sit here where I can see you. But first, I ought to tell you that I heard most of your conversation a while back,—unintentionally, it is true — but the fact still remains that I *did* hear it."

A MODERN KNIGHT

"How much did you hear?" inquired Alton through set teeth. "Not what I said about —"

"About a hell on earth? Yes, I did," she replied in a hushed voice,— then noting his look of horror she hurried on, "but please don't worry over that,— it was perfectly all right,— and if I had not been such a selfish little wretch I would have had this talk with you before this! Sh-h-h!" as Alton tried to speak to her, I'm going to talk now,—and you are to listen!"

"Barbara," broke in Alton, determinedly, "I *will* speak! If you are trying to tell me what I most wish to hear — let me help you out, can't I?"

Barbara laid a cool palm for an instant against his lips and answered solemnly,

"I know you would do it all for me,— but I can't let you. I just *must* do it myself! Supposing it *should* be what you say you most wish to hear? What of it? A thing isn't worth giving unless it is just a little bit hard to give, is it? Now, first here is the letter I promised to show you some day."

Alton glanced over it in complete silence. It read —

A MODERN KNIGHT

My dear little Barbara —

You must let me call you that, especially as I am writing to welcome you into the family. Of course you can guess that we were greatly surprised at the news of Alton's marriage, but he has sent us such glowing accounts of you that we are all anxious to get you home among ourselves. Persuade the boy to bring you home as soon as possible, where you will find a hearty welcome awaiting you, and where we will all do our best to insure your future happiness. Alton is a dear fellow, as you will learn to know when you have seen more of him, and from his letters I gather that you have come to mean the world and all to him. He told me about your mutual promises, and I have no comment to make — save one! If you are not learning to love him as he deserves — if, when you are older, you are ever going to demand your freedom, — then, for his sake, as well as your own, — take it now! Otherwise you will wreck a life of wonderful promise and break a heart whose sterling worth you cannot possibly know as do I who have cared for him for over twenty-five

A MODERN KNIGHT

years! He is one of the Lord's Anointed, and any girl who has so completely won the love of a man of such high ideals,—such a true-hearted, clean-minded man, and one whose sense of honor is as high above most of us as are the stars above his head,—such a girl must be a truly lovable girl, and I am waiting anxiously to get you where I can know you well! Remember, we are all waiting to give you a royal welcome, and come to us soon.

Believe me, dear, yours, as well
as Alton's

Mater.

Barbara, watching him intently, saw his countenance soften as he read, then a shamed expression come over his face as he came to the outright praise of himself, and he handed it back to her with the remark,—

“The Mater's a brick, but she put it on a little bit too thick about me. I'm a mere man,—not a ‘little tin god’ you know, Barbara.”

The girl ignored his bantering remark and tossed the letter on the seat beside her, saying, “Next! You remember asking me what I did

A MODERN KNIGHT

with the money you gave me to spend in Salt Lake City?"

"Yes — and you didn't wish to tell me."

"Why didn't you insist upon knowing?"

"Why on earth should I? I gave it to you to spend as you liked!"

"Pretty soon I will show you what I bought with it! But now — do you really and truly care for me as your step-mother said, a while ago, Alton?"

"God knows, I *do*, little girl," returned the man, resting his elbows on his knees and burying his face in his hands to shut out the transfigured look on the one before him. "I care more than you will ever know, I fear!"

"How much do you care?" persisted Barbara, softly.

"How much?" repeated the harassed fellow, slowly. "Dear child,— I care enough so that if you would be happier away from me, I could let you go from my sight this moment, for all time, and try to rejoice that your life was your own, to mould as you willed. But oh! It *would* be hard!"

The smothered groan which escaped For-dyce's lips wrung the girl's heart and she made haste to finish her share of the episode.

A MODERN KNIGHT

"Do you remember this gown?" she asked.

Without raising his head the answer came.

"Do you think I could *forget*? You have never worn it since and I have sometimes wondered if I had made you hate it?"

"No! I vowed, that night, never to put it on again until — well, until this evening, for instance! And now —" she flung a roguish look at his bowed head. "Now, would you like to fasten me up — all up, *this* time, Alton?"

The man's hands twitched, and he rose and faced her with a look of determination upon his handsome countenance.

"Barbara, please — please don't play with me! It isn't like you, — and I can't stand much more of it! Tell me *just* what you are trying to make me understand, — but, for God's sake, don't tempt me to break my word of honor to you, dear! If you only knew —"

"Perhaps I *do* know — more than you think, Alton dear! Do you see this?" and she drew the long chain from her neck and laid the locket in the man's hand. The little trinket was warm from its nest above her heart, and the big Englishman's fingers trembled visibly as he turned it over and over, searching for the opening.

A MODERN KNIGHT

"You must cut the rivet," breathed Barbara. "I had it fixed so no one but you or I could open it! Please hurry and cut it!"

Alton sank back upon the couch, intent upon the opening of the article which he held, while the girl dropped to her knees beside him, and waited breathlessly for the moment of its revelation. At last there was a click, as the hinge gave way under the energy of the attack, and a folded paper fell into the waiting hand.

"Open it!" commanded Barbara, kneeling wide-eyed and fearless, close to Alton's side. As the thin paper was gradually flattened out a change came over the man.

"Why,—it is my letter — to you — on the train! What does this mean?"

His hand closed like a vise on the softly-rounded shoulder nearest him from which the scarf had fallen. "Barbara,—it can only mean one thing! Tell me quickly, dear — don't keep me in suspense! Oh, my dear little girl, do you *care?*"

"Now, you see why I wore the gown, Alton dear," breathed Barbara, tremulously, in a voice hardly above a whisper, laying her cheek against the brown hand clutching her shoulder. What else she started to say he did not wait to hear,

A MODERN KNIGHT

for with one swoop he gathered her into his arms and retired with her into the corner of the deep couch, to hold her close to his heart and kiss and kiss her as he had so many times dreamed of doing, and to whisper many endearing words into the ear of the girl whom a great and chivalrous love had awakened to her "crown of womanhood."

.

After waiting in her room until nearly midnight, wondering why Alton did not come, and after fidgeting over his delay as long as her usually healthy nerves would stand the strain, Mrs. Fordyce passed along the balcony to see if any light betokened her boy's presence in his room. Seeing none, she was about to pass on to Barbara's door when she happened to glance over the railing — and stood transfixed at the picture which met her eyes.

In the deep sofa-corner, the firelight revealed two figures,— one, a bulky form in the conventional black and white of masculine evening attire, and in the arms of this figure rested snugly what seemed a mere doll in filmy lavender draperies,—the small head was pillowed on the man's broad shoulder,—both his arms were locked tightly about the slender form,—one of the

A MODERN KNIGHT

“doll’s” own exquisite arms was thrown up about the man’s neck,— and both were sleeping,— while on the two faces the watcher could read a perfect trust and understanding.

“It’s come at last!” breathed Mrs. For-dyce, as she hurried down to assure herself that no one was stirring below-stairs. Having investigated and satisfied herself that everyone was safely in bed,— or at least, upstairs,— she was about to retire to her own room when she was seized with a sudden idea. The two who had fallen asleep so unintentionally before the fire, looked as if they were asleep to stay for some time at least, and how could she be sure that they would not be discovered by some stupid servant,— the butler, for instance, if he should chance to be down unusually early to air out the house after the storm?

With a very tender little smile she stole back to the side of the sleepers,— laid a soft, light comfortable over them,— and betook herself to a point of vantage in the passage, armed with a book, in order that no prying eye might come upon the little tableau which had brought the happy, sympathetic tears to her own eyes when she had first taken in its full significance.

A MODERN KNIGHT

So she sat, the remainder of the night, alternately reading and dreaming, until she realized with a start that the first faint streaks of light were beginning to show at the eastern windows. While she was looking out at the misty, gray world below her she heard the first sound from the lounge,— a gentle stir, and the rustle of silken draperies, as their owner evidently tried to efface the effects of her involuntary siesta. Then she heard Alton's voice speak Barbara's name in a tone which made her long to hug them both,— then,

“ I say, darling,— how the dickens do you suppose this comforter came — ”

“ Hush, hush, dear,” returned Barbara, with a little gurgle of laughter.

At the sound, Mrs. Fordyce hurried softly away to her room to indulge in some sleep, but more reveries, until the usual nine o'clock breakfast hour.

Several hours later she was descending demurely and innocently to the breakfast room, all traces of her night's vigil effaced, when, from the huge south veranda, through the wide open door came a rush of feet and the silvery ripple of Barbara's laughter,— and she found herself waylaid by both Alton and his wife, with eyes

A MODERN KNIGHT

alight and the beauty of the new-born morning in their countenances. Before she could say a word to them, her hands were seized, her lips effectually sealed with kisses, and she heard two happy voices exclaiming, close to her ears —

“ *Good* morning, Mater darling,— isn’t it just the most *glorious* world? ”

THE END.

DEC 20 1911

One copy del. to Cat. Div.

DEC 20 1911

JAN 3 1912

